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IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTER

Negotiating Between Inferred Authority and Reader Causality in Prose Novels and Video Games

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IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTER
Negotiating Between Inferred Authority and Reader
Causality in Prose Novels and Video Games

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the
Department of English, Faculty of Arts & Humanities
King's College London

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Abstract

In this thesis I undertake a comparison of novels and video games in order to clarify the ontological and ethical processes involved in reader construction of fictional characters. I demonstrate how the sequences of novels necessitate inference of textual authority. In contrast, although video games offer control over sequence, such control is unstable and can be compared with the effects of reader emotional engagement where inference as to what *might* happen in a narrative will often transform into what *should* happen next on behalf of various characters. Furthermore, I argue that as all characters must be constructed and staged on an ongoing basis for any feeling of allegiance to be sustained, identification should be seen as representing the ongoing construction and evaluation of *all* fictional characters in a given text.

As a result of these arguments, I propose the concept of reader/player causality, by which I refer to the general philosophical orientation underpinning what the player brings to the text in this regard even beyond what textual revelations can erase. In video games, for example, players seem synonymous with their avatars, but frequently game narratives will provide explanations for player actions that are inconsistent with the real life player's intention, with the player's initial bias still affecting the character produced. Reader causality operates in a similar way where the reader's wish for certain events to occur will likewise affect interpretation and identification even if subsequent narrative events contradict prior assumptions or wishes. In turn, the reader's acceptance of such additions or alterations to characters carries with it ethical responsibility and choice. In this manner, I define identification as the imposition of reader causality/feeling combined with the absorption of diegetic rewriting of all characters in a text on a moment-by-moment basis with new versions negotiated in contract with inferred authority.

(299 words)

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INTRODUCTION

Theories of Reader Construction of Character from the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis to ‘Psychic Infection’

1. Preface

In the following thesis I will put forward a theory of identification with fictional characters that argues for a broadening of the term’s definition to encompass many component processes of reader construction of fictional characters which might hitherto have been seen as merely related. In order to do this, I analyse prose novels alongside video games. Games frequently permit their players to engage in decision-making and hold responsibility for diegetic outcomes in a far more explicit manner than might seem apparent in reader involvement in novels, allowing divergence in diegetic events in different play-throughs and an almost literal sense of presence for the player in the synthetic kinesthetically-navigable space of the narrative at hand. My overall methodology in this regard is to intervene in debates using problematic examples to more clearly demonstrate the ‘normative’ workings of the reading process. Throughout my work I also destabilise various concepts that might somewhat ironically have become settled since deconstructionism, such as the incoherency of the self and the resulting avoidance of concerted discussion of fictional characters as a concept in literary and narrative fields.

My intention throughout this thesis is to build towards an initial hypothesis as to what occurs when readers encounter fictional characters in texts. To this end I work through various elements that might be seen as logically important in the reader’s construction of characterising details from a prose text, particularly the ontology of the fictional character as emerging from a necessarily sequential encounter with characterising details on the micro-level of style and macro-level of events. Firstly, I consider how such sequences might generate a sense of what the text is asking the reader to do. The resulting authority inferred by the reader might be identified with any number of factors including the traditional figure of the author, for example. I consider how reader inference of a text’s authority combines with the reader’s emotional engagement to affect how future characterising details are accepted into the reader’s overall model of a particular character. After exploring how this process works in relation to the existence of multiple characters within a text and the reader’s own ongoing decision-making – a factor which becomes clearer when compared with identification in response to video game characters -- I define my model of identification with fictional characters as follows: ‘the imposition of reader causality/feeling combined with the absorption of diegetic rewriting of all

characters in a text on a moment-by-moment basis with new versions negotiated in contract with inferred authority’.

I not only explore the nature of fictional characters and reader construction of character in ontological terms, however, but throughout I also consider questions as to the ethics of such identification, particularly with regards to feminism and misogyny. In the arguments of this thesis I am drawn between multiple aims and concerns that could fail to convince many of my readers on philosophical terms – ‘how can you know readers will respond in a particular manner?’ – and likewise risk trivialising or speaking for groups I do not possess membership of. I discuss what I deem to be potential likelihoods of reader reception and co-construction of texts with an argument that frequently gestures as to how different groups such as women, feminists, and misogynists might engage in the reading process. However, my thesis is based in part upon a necessarily simplified and even caricatured version of each hypothetical group and which, apart from a brief foray into international literature with Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1963) in Chapter One, will not yet deal with urgent intersectional elements of these processes and their ethics relating to race, ableism, LGBT concerns, and class.

I focus upon problematic texts usually written by cis white men inattentive to such intersectional concerns primarily due to my interest in the reader acceptance of what I term ‘inferred authority’ – what readers believe texts demand of them on a moment by moment and often implicit basis. I am interested in the way in which such engagement often *de facto* leads to acceptance of a world where a certain group are ontologically lesser and distorted compared to their real life counterparts, in this case women. Although my thesis throughout concerns itself with the depiction of women, this is not just to provide feminist analysis of the texts at hand but also to make broader hypotheses about the nature of identification using the case study of such a pervasive and immediate problem as that of gender inequality in character construction. The demonstration of identification’s workings in this regard is much clearer when there is less ambiguity over whether the author is intending to critique misogynistic attitudes from a supposed feminist position, as opposed to implicitly representing women in such a way that most readers will believe the author thinks women are ‘like that’.

2. The Ethics of Narrative Empathy and Engagement with Fictional Characters

Suzanne Keen has defined narrative empathy as ‘the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and

condition’.¹ Extensive and almost ubiquitous testimony exists from non-academic readers and audiences of the deep feelings they believe they share with fictional characters; however, whether such narrative empathy is positive or even ethically beneficial for readers stands as a matter of contention. The role and nature of narrative empathy has experienced unparalleled theorisation and conceptualisation by non-academics within a debate that has raged for several thousand years since the time of Plato, involving not only literary critics but philosophers, politicians, religions, corporations, civil servants, and the general public as to whether the experience of narrative empathy is harmful or beneficial to readers’ lives. In this introduction I explore debates regarding narrative empathy between those who view the process as possessing utopian potential – the ‘empathy-altruism’ hypothesis – and those who view such processes as potentially dangerous and leading to ‘psychic infection’. I show how this debate often revolves around the power of fictionality, returning to questions posed since Plato’s *Republic* (c.380BC), and I suggest some preliminary ways in which consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethics might relate to the ethics of fiction. As a result of my analysis of prior theories and debates relating to fictional characters, I posit the role of sequence in producing a sense of a text’s authority, narrative empathy, and a reader’s ethics to be of prime importance.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for example, argues that fiction is a particularly powerful tool for social change and ethical betterment as it promotes an understanding of others.² As Ann Jurecic highlights, this view is seen throughout Western secondary education systems, where novels are often selected for students based on the values they might teach. Furthermore, Jurecic shows how this view is reflected at the highest levels of political office; for example, Barack Obama spoke in 2007 about how it is ‘books more than anything else that are going to give our young people the ability to see other people. And that then gives them the capacity to act responsibly with respect to other people’.³ Praise of the power of empathy is also found throughout popular culture; Jurecic points towards the influence and popularity of Oprah Winfrey’s empathy-praising Book Club as suggestive of the widespread belief that such empathy leads to altruistic action.⁴ Associations are made throughout much of modern society between one’s cultured reading of novels and one’s status as a model citizen; the social sciences themselves have extended their consideration of empathy towards novels in C. Daniel Batson’s

¹ Suzanne Keen, ‘Narrative Empathy’, in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2013)

<http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narrative_Empathy> [accessed 3 August 2015].

² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 85.

³ Ann Jurecic, ‘Empathy and the Critic’, *College English*, 74.1 (2011), 10-27 (p. 14).

⁴ Jurecic, p. 13.

inclusion of fictional encounters within his ‘empathy-altruism hypothesis’, by which Batson refers to the theory that empathy with others is likely to lead to altruistic action.⁵

However, the elevation of the novel to be a paragon of cultural sophistication and ethical refinement is a relatively recent occurrence; throughout time, theatre, novels, films, and video games have all been seen in their turn as having the potential to lead audiences astray. Neither is this cultural suspicion of artistic forms relegated to the past, as the video game medium itself still suffers from such cultural scrutiny even today. There is a fear echoed across hundreds of years of literary criticism that fictional forms such as these invite an excess of identification with people who are not fully ‘real’, that readers might blur the boundaries between their own selves and characters they read about and mimic their actions in reality. As Lee Grieveson noted regarding the censorship of film, it was feared that epidemic ‘psychic infection’ might spread and compel viewers to become bank robbers, delinquents, or fall into general immorality through what was seen as lowbrow entertainment.⁶ It might seem easy to dismiss this as small-minded politicking designed to take advantage of the fears of the electorate, but more sophisticated versions of these arguments exist in artistic spheres. Most famously, Bertolt Brecht argued that over-identification and too much empathy with particular characters in theatre could lead to a loss of perspective of the overall social situation portrayed on stage; as a result, audiences would lose sight of the way in which such fictional situations might signify specifically real-world issues that could be judged and acted upon outside of the fictional after a theatrical performance has ended.⁷ Brecht’s philosophical perspective here contrasts with that of Nussbaum, whose championing of narrative empathy rests upon the consideration of empathy and emotion as forms of reasoning in themselves rather than ‘irrational’ states of intoxication.⁸

New media is likewise attacked as lowbrow and pernicious in a manner that specifically takes aim at its affordances for narrative empathy; contemporary arguments against video games, for example, seem repeatedly to focus upon the notion that children will lose a sense that they are engaging in a fictional simulator and that somehow the performance of actions in a fictional space will lead to violence being carried out in the real world. Every year news stories of murder and violence recur with the discovery of a copy of a *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2015),⁹

⁵ C. Daniel Batson et al, ‘Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28.12 (2002): 1656-66 (pp. 1665-66).

⁶ Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: University of California Press, 2004), p. 12.

⁷ Bertolt Brecht, ‘Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting’ in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 91-99.

⁸ Martha. C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), passim.

⁹ *Grand Theft Auto*, created by Dan Houser and Sam Houser (Rockstar Games, 1997-2015).

Call of Duty (2003-14),¹⁰ or *World of Warcraft* (2004) game in the killer's room;¹¹ journalists, organisations, and politicians sensationally exploit public fear relating to such cases based on a faulty logic of mimetic association between the content of video games and real-life equivalents in the manner of prior attacks on film and other mediums. For example, with the Sandy Hook killings, the killer was found to have been interested in video games; to combat allegations that gun control systems in America were not working, the NRA attempted to blame video games instead, playing off of the popular association of video games with the First Person Shooter (FPS) genre when in reality this killer's favourite games were the Super Mario (1985-2013) series and dancing games.¹²

Beyond this specific instance, even when FPS games have been found to have been played by criminals, attacks on the medium fail to account for the extensive popularity of such video games in modern culture; if this 'psychic infection' hypothesis that fiction can cause people to commit certain crimes were true, then the statistically low incidence of such crimes in relation to the millions of people who play these games would suggest this link is not accurate. However, whether this form has no power at all to influence its players is also debatable; press coverage of the 'Gamer Gate' online harassment movement for example, driven by misogynist attacks and conspiracy theories regarding feminist critics of video games, posits a problem in how video games depict women but also how gamer ethics might be influenced by their playing. It is ironic that so many attack the notion that video game depictions of women might be harmful, only to issue bomb threats and torrents of misogynist abuse over Twitter against women who dare to make these claims.¹³ Chapter Three of this thesis explores issues relating to the depiction of women in video games whilst Chapter Four explores player motivation for decision-making in games; both chapters serve not only to show how and why these events and ethical charges might have been levelled at video games but also the resulting implications for criticism and theory on prose novels.

Much mainstream narrative theory has neglected the potential role of video games in clarifying and opening up old questions for new debate. For example, Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) intervenes in the empathy-altruism debate but excludes video games from her

¹⁰ *Call of Duty*, created by Ben Chichoski (Infinity Ward, 2003-14).

¹¹ *World of Warcraft*, designed by Rob Pardo, Jeff Kaplan, and Tom Chilton (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).

¹² *Super Mario*, created by Shigeru Miyamoto (Nintendo, 1985-2013); 'Remarks from the NRA press conference on Sandy Hook school shooting, delivered on Dec. 21, 2012 (Transcript)', *Washington Post*, 21 December 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/remarks-from-the-nra-press-conference-on-sandy-hook-school-shooting-delivered-on-dec-21-2012-transcript/2012/12/21/bd1841fe-4b88-11e2-a6a6-aabac85e8036_story.html> [accessed 31 August 2015]; Amy Davidson, 'The Final Report on Sandy Hook?', *The New Yorker*, 26 November 2013 <<http://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/the-final-report-on-sandy-hook>> [accessed 31 August 2015].

¹³ Kevin Rawlinson and Leo Kelion, 'GamerGate: "Press must tackle misogyny," says developer', *BBC News*, 14 October 2014 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-29616197>> [accessed 31 August 2015].

analysis despite the urgent and current nature of this contemporary debate over video games and its similarities to prior debates about the novel and film. Her brief mention of the medium locates it as an ‘extreme case of voluntary exchange of one’s own reality for the sensations of another’ that ‘takes to its furthest logical extension the fusing with another object that aesthetics’ *Einführung* set out to describe in the 1890s’. However, Keen’s location of games as the ‘furthest logical extension’ of her source material is ghettoised a page later not only through its juxtaposition with an analysis of pornography but also through quotations suggesting games are ‘antisocial’ and stressing the danger of such mediums.¹⁴ This thesis will attempt to reverse and rectify such exclusion, not just because the games medium deserves this attention but because the incorporation of games in such theories can act as a disruptive force for our analysis of prose novels going forward, problematizing existing ideas to allow critics and theorists to revisit assumptions about what novels are capable of doing.

For example, in her analysis of prose novels, Keen concludes that theories of literary empathy leading to altruistic social behaviour lack real evidence as to their having occurred in any real meaningful way. Keen argues that this lack of evidence does not mean that empathy cannot have both positive *and* negative effects upon readers, but that this hypothesis requires further evidence if bold claims about empathy’s extensive powers are to be made.¹⁵ Keen can therefore be seen as bridging both the pro-social ‘empathy-altruism’ position and negative ‘psychic infection’ position on narrative empathy, downplaying and mitigating our sense of the power of what narrative empathy can really achieve in society. By introducing video games in such a debate, I will show how such concepts as identification, empathy, altruism, and ethical action are problematized in novels through comparison with games where such terms seem to become far more literal in their application via an avatar through which players can alter diegetic events in an explicit and self-conscious manner.

Arguments regarding the powers or dangers of narrative empathy not only need to take into account new technologies but should also revisit old ideas and explore their continuity throughout time; in many respects Keen’s central critique represents a return to ideas as old as Plato, bringing this debate over the ethics of narrative response and fictionality full-circle. Plato’s critique of fiction in Book X of the *Republic* prefigures attacks on fiction throughout time, as Alexander Nehamas has demonstrated; novels, television programmes, films, video games, and even art installations have been feared to potentially corrupt or distract individuals from leading ethical lives ever since. Nehamas writes:

¹⁴ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 39-40.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 116-17, *passim*.

I find Plato's attack on Homer upsetting not because I think Homer is pernicious but because I find in it all the features that have characterized every attack on popular culture and entertainment since his time. He was there first, and he is still in the lead. The irony is that those who repeat his attack, in the name of taste, cultivation and refinement, do so in ignorance of the fact that they follow on his footsteps.¹⁶

However, Plato's critique of fiction in Book X of *The Republic* does not simply involve an attack on fictionality as potentially depicting immoral actions or as inaccurately representing some metaphysical reality. In a more mundane and relevant manner to modern debates over narrative empathy, Plato argues that poets are not as qualified as we give them credit for in their 'imitation' of human beings, and, indeed, that poets are potentially more successful at creating seductive pleasures and pains for their listeners than real ethical effects. Plato repeatedly refers to his narrator Socrates' enjoyment of poetry and his desire for the concept to somehow be rehabilitated – 'Therefore, isn't it just that such poetry should return from exile when it has successfully defended itself[?]'¹⁷ – yet his speaker finds the problem lies in a lack of evidence for fiction's effects. Plato asks why Homeric-inspired cities and rulers do not exist if fiction is really capable of inspiring ethical improvement in this manner, prefiguring Susanne Keen's questions regarding fictional empathy's supposed social effects.

Furthermore, unlike Keen, Plato does not try to maintain some possible albeit small social benefit for narrative empathy in the face of a lack of evidence. For Plato, fiction corrupts primarily because it is a seductive and enjoyable waste of time that not only diverts thought from tasks the mind's energy could better be diverted towards but which also encourages us to enjoy what Plato terms our 'womanish' melodramatic expression of emotion and therefore to respond more emotively and with less exercise of reason in everyday life.¹⁸ Plato's misogyny is not just a product of his time but prefigures much of Western culture and literary theory since. Attacks on empathy as a reasoning method throughout time are frequently gendered in this way, with empathy and emotion often seen as particularly feminine and often opposed in binary opposition with reasoning and masculinity.¹⁹ Plato's other arguments likewise find continuity in later thinking, as do those positions he attacks such as trying to hold on to poetry as a desirable social good. Plato's question of the lack of evidence for fiction's moral power has still not yet been fully answered in later work, and has even been forgotten in part, as witnessed in the recurrence of similar questions in Keen's work on empathy.

¹⁶ Alexander Nehamas, 'Culture, Art and Poetry in The Republic', <<http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/lectures/fall1999>> (New York: Columbia College, 1999) [accessed 3 August 2015].

¹⁷ Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 1211.

¹⁸ Plato, p. 1210.

¹⁹ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Palgrave, 1992), p. 84.

What if literature has little effect other than inducing slight personal pleasure or pain in its readers, rather than the utopian and apocalyptic potentials for social change that so many have theorised? Is narrative empathy, as Suzanne Keen suggests, capable of slight positive social function, or have arguments such as Keen's reduced fiction's power so much that Plato's argument becomes the inevitable conclusion we must hold to – that at the end of so many defences and attacks on fictional empathy, our engagement with fiction might be a distraction, a way of feeling better or worse in our everyday lives, like going for a short walk or having a brief sleep? We could mitigate the strength of this conclusion by locating Plato's anti-affective bias as a product of his particular philosophy and time period, suspending awareness of the continuity of such attacks throughout time. We could raise some alternative perspectives that see fictional distractions as being of some usefulness inasmuch as this pleasure or pain might assist with normal cognitive and emotional functioning and help us cope with the stresses of our everyday lives, functioning as intellectual and affective entertainment. Yet what then for an ethics of literature? What if these serious arguments about the purpose of fiction, empathy with characters, and the role of our response to texts in wider society turn out to be a search for a meaning that simply is not there to the extent we wish it to be?

These concerns can be analogised to Camus' analysis of religious and existential thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942); a search for meaning in the face of oblivion and the absurd gives way to theories that deliver peace of mind but in the same breath delude the individual from their 'awoken' state and lived experience of the world. What Camus calls the tradition of 'humiliated thought' never goes away;²⁰ theories that try to bring meaning to our lives will recur with the same types of reasoning regardless of how many arguments have been made against these kinds of theories in the past, whether they posit God, spirituality, or any other alternative as a buffer against a nihilistic void. So it is here potentially with a search not just for meaning in fiction, but the attempt to charge that meaning with altruistic or corrupting ethical and social effects upon those who read, watch, and play fiction, in spite of difficulty in finding evidence for such effects. The repetition of such defences and attacks on fiction demands another question be asked; why and how has empathy with fictional characters become a battleground for such a debate? Why has this aspect of literary response created such diversity and intensity of opinion? Fictional empathy does not appear to be a matter of life, death, and ultimate meaning as with those arguments Camus addresses in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, so why is narrative empathy such an important reading hermeneutic for so many, that it must be defended in this way?

²⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 22.

There are those, however, who do not consider narrative empathy important or interesting either in an altruistic or dangerous sense. This alternative perspective can shed light on the existence of this debate over the power of narrative empathy – a perspective that does not merely mitigate claims for narrative empathy’s power, as Keen does, but rather ignores such claims entirely. Many literary critics and theorists deny or sidestep the existence of literary empathy as something that does not happen or that happens to such a weak and indefinable extent that it is not worth talking about. For such critics, to read with empathy and identification represents an inferior or juvenile mode of reading, and that even if empathy is admitted as part of the reading experience of fiction, its discussion nevertheless has little place in mainstream literary criticism and theory. Instead, these theorists frequently prioritise the reader’s affective relationship with authors or anthropomorphic ‘texts themselves’ above empathetic relationships with particularised literary characters. In many ways, what may be deemed the ‘anti-’ narrative empathy spirit of this critical position invites parallels with arguments that consider the dangers of narrative empathy. However, rather than viewing such processes as dangerous, these critics instead consider narrative empathy negatively as a naïve or unintelligent way of reading but not necessarily as harmful.

In this perspective, the non-specialist reader's emotional response to individual characters – (‘I really identified with the protagonist’) – is viewed with a diluted form of Brechtian suspicion. Academics are instead directed away from what this position views as a distraction with individual characters towards a supposedly more objective ‘text itself’ composed of formal features to be identified and analysed. The phenomenological reader-response criticism of writers such as Georges Poulet largely ignores narrative empathy with fictional characters and instead suggests a surrender to authorial consciousness.²¹ Meanwhile, practitioners such as Vladimir Nabokov recommend that students should not engage in ‘infantile’ identification with characters but with the author who creates them.²²

However, even these and other similar proposals that we should identify with authors instead of characters are for the most part abandoned as naïve in the wake of the various deaths of the Author that occur in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the reader-response theory that followed seems little interested in the reader's relation with mere characters but instead focuses on the author's replacement (the text), returning once again to formalism. Indeed, as Jane Tompkins observes, much reader-response theory develops ‘within the confines of a

²¹ Georges Poulet, ‘Criticism and the Experience of Interiority’, trans. by Catherine & Richard Macksey in Jane P. Tompkins ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 41-49.

²² Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), pp. 381-82.

formalist position', a 'text-centred' view that finds value in 'the words on the page'.²³ Wayne Booth's 'implied author' begins to work alongside the 'text itself' as a concept that does not require critical focus upon a 'flesh and blood author' but which maintains the prior relationship between these figures.²⁴ Likewise, we can see Wolfgang Iser's 'gaps' as implying missing textual detail that the 'good' reader is supposed to insert due to the text's anthropomorphic 'intention' asking him or her to do so.²⁵ Ansgar Nünning objects to Booth's 'implied author' as he tries to define this figure both as the structure of a text as a whole and as an 'addresser in the communication model of narrative' at the same time, wanting a term that avoids the trap of personification.²⁶ Michel Foucault's reading of the 'author-function' in his essay 'What is an Author?' demonstrates how such a function of the text as the 'implied author' is inferred, and discusses how readers assume meaning, purpose, relevancy, and resolve contradictions in texts, despite those texts being 'just' writing without such operations being necessary.²⁷ The text does not necessarily 'imply' an author; a reader infers an author and pieces of information that must be interpreted and reconciled in order to understand the text at hand.

However, not only do many theories that overlook or disregard narrative empathy resemble weak versions of censoring attacks on narrative empathy as distracting or naïve, but so too can they be seen unintentionally and inadvertently to contribute to the theorization of the nature of narrative empathy they exclude from their work. Whether a contemporary reader necessarily cares about the existence of a real being communicating with him or her via the medium of the novel is not a given, and particularly in an era where many works are produced by many hands - where films and video games represent collaborations between many often unseen figures - the elevation of the biographical author to a high pedestal in the minds of the majority of readers is not necessarily likely. Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' (1967) has partially come to pass not due to force of persuasive argument but due to the maturation and greater popularity of these new media forms. However, the very act of trying to link together disparate fragments of a text into a whole - whether these fragments are chapters, scenes, bits of characterising detail or information in need of interpretation -- represents an assumption on the part of the reader that a text *does* have unified meaning in a manner reminiscent of Barthes' delusory 'victory to the critic' upon deciphering ultimate meaning.²⁸ Even if alternative meanings in a text are to be

²³ *Reader-Response Criticism*, p. x.

²⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn., (London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 71-76, *passim*.

²⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), *passim*.

²⁶ Ansgar Nünning, 'Deconstructing and Reconceptualizing the "implied Author": The Resurrection of an Anthropomorphicized Passepartout or the Obituary of a Critical Phantom?', *Anglistik*, 8.2 (1997), 95-116.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, 'What Is An Author?' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Babinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 101-20.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 147.

found, they still must be justified in some element of the existing text and therefore represent a latent and unlockable coherency.

This thesis will argue for an ‘inferred authority’ rather than an ‘implied author’. By ‘inferred authority’, I mean a way of responding to the sequence of a text that seems to be sanctioned by the text and that the reader seems encouraged to follow in his or her interpretation. This inferred authority allows for the fact that readers often accept many such ways of reading a single text even though some interpretations also are largely perceived to be ‘better than others’. This new term ‘inferred authority’ contains within it the prior suggestion of ‘author’, whilst also allowing some notion of a voiceless yet authoritative ‘text itself’ to be seen to issue commands or invitations to the reader. The inferred authority is what the reader thinks he or she is supposed to follow in order to read or respond to a work, inferring meaning from the order in which narrative details are encountered. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, inferences as to where a sequence is going to go and what has not yet been revealed work together to shape how we respond to the rest of a narrative from an early stage, shaped by genre assumptions and reader idiosyncrasy. This thesis will attempt to make the same argumentative move that Keen made with theories of narrative empathy and account for the reality of the existing critical situation; even if it is arbitrary and unnecessary, real readers do tend to try and read fictional narratives as if they are inferring some kind of authority to be followed within the narrative in order for everything to be made coherent and understood. Therefore, criticism and theory should account for the intricacies of this process rather than necessarily try to change the way people engage with fiction such as those who oppose identification (whether on ‘dangerous’ or ‘juvenile’ grounds) have attempted.

The methodology I employ throughout my thesis is similar in a sense to James Phelan’s concept of narrative progression in relation to character as explored in *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989). Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz’s concept of narrative progression posits a theory of the forward movement of a narrative and the way in which a reader feels about the author’s role in this process. My methodology may initially appear similar to Phelan’s in tracing the structure of texts through a combination of close readings and an attention to larger narrative concepts regarding the various possible tensions the reader might be enmeshed within – even going so far as to analyse one of Phelan’s own source texts in the form of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). However, I am philosophically opposed to Phelan’s suggestion of the primacy of fiction as communication between reader and author; although such a model is sometimes relevant to some readers, changing models of what ‘authorities’ are trusted in texts have already shifted due to cultural change and team-based productions of film, television, and video games.

Moreover, the internal tensions within Phelan's own analysis in *Reading People, Reading Plots* hints at the difficulty of maintaining an author-centric communication model. For example, Phelan's analysis of *1984* shifts from frequently referencing what the author or text does early on in his argument to a gradual emergence of 'we' and the reader's creative action in the second half without needing to reference the author.²⁹ Although I frequently reference authors, texts, and apparent intentionality throughout my analysis, I do so from a position of considering all of these elements as inferred constructs by possible readers in given situations that do not necessarily resemble different authorities inferred by other possible readers. I am as concerned with the processes readers engage in whilst constructing characters as what these readers *think* they are doing; therefore, models of the author cannot entirely be abandoned as they reflect reality for many readers. In such ways, throughout this thesis I will argue that the reader's inference of authority and ongoing decision-making in complying with this authority is a subject of great ethical interest wherein much of the ethical potential of fiction lies.

Reader engagement with inferred power structures in a text could be used to explain why theories of narrative empathy's potential power as a positive or negative force are so often made to such hyperbolic extents. As mentioned earlier, when faced with the problem of absurdity, death, and meaning, Camus claims in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that we cannot simply replace these figures with alternatives such as God or merely optimistically proclaim their opposite; Camus argues instead that the person who faces such a situation should, if they wish to continue living, accept the futility of arguing against death and face up to the time-limited freedom this entails. Here, with these grand arguments of narrative empathy, an ethics cannot be formed through some generic and contrary proclamation that narrative empathy *does* wield huge social power in spite of a lack of evidence (symptomatic of reader emotional investment in characters), or through an escape to theorisation of the author or 'the text itself' instead (symptomatic of reader investment in inferred authority). The disparity and force of existing arguments in this arena should not be seen as mutually exclusive but as revelatory inasmuch as they reveal what such emotional investment tells us about the nature of these processes and why different aspects of the process of character construction might be foregrounded in particular claims.

Furthermore, we cannot entirely escape the notion that fiction does have some bearing upon the real world in which humans live and die; fiction takes the real as its life's blood, and without some level of mimesis it would be nonsensical. Therefore, if fiction uses reality for its backdrop, and reality is a matter for ethical analysis, then is not fiction a matter for ethical analysis by extension? Keen partly accounts for the failure of the empathy-altruism hypothesis

²⁹ James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 27-43.

through fictionality, suggesting that the fictional itself allows readers to express great emotion without feeling the need to respond in the real world, and that this fictional status may indeed in fact inhibit altruistic expression elsewhere in response to similar issues.³⁰ In his aforementioned theory of character in *Reading People Reading Plots*, Jim Phelan distinguishes between three aspects of character – what he terms the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic – with each element vying for prominence according to the author’s wishes in a given text.³¹ Although Phelan’s concern is not primarily ethical and his analysis using this schema is unnecessarily author-centric, his highlighting of the interplay between different parts of characterisation helps to provide an initial and clear terminology for aspects covered by much of this thesis and a common vocabulary with other theories of character.

Three branches of normative ethics can be seen as having a bearing upon the construction of a fictional character in this regard – consequentialism, where ethical judgment is based upon consequences of actions; deontology, where such ethics is rather found in behaviour and actions rather than any consequences; and virtue ethics, where the person himself or herself is the locus of ethical judgement rather than his or her behaviour or the consequences of actions.

Deontological ethics would, in valuing behaviour rather than consequences, have some bearing upon fictional interactions with and construction of character, as there are no ‘real life’ consequences to fictional (synthetic) actions but possibly an altered fictionally-oriented range of behaviours. Likewise, virtue ethics might shed light upon the nature of characters constructed and how narrative empathy and identification reflect upon the individual. The greatest objection to an ethics of narrative empathy with fiction would seem to be in consequentialism; as prior debates have claimed, there is little evidence that narrative empathy has led to strong positive or negative consequences upon society. Moreover, in the case of an individual response to a particular fiction, how one constructs and feels about a fictional character has no real consequence upon any real or indeed even any fictional person, as that person is synthetic and in prose novels at the very least characters cannot in an explicit sense ‘know’ the reader’s feelings. Phelan argues fictional texts work to encourage mimetic, synthetic, and thematic ways of viewing character at different moments and in different combinations. However, I will argue that when considered in an ontological sense the synthetic component of character is of prime importance inasmuch as it is already contained within the mimetic (the mimetic distinguished from the real due to its ‘copying’ imitating nature) and gives coherency to the thematic (values are anchored through their inferred reference to the synthetic being). This synthetic underpinning to all aspects of character may seem common-sensical, but its implications for

³⁰ Keen, pp. 16-19, *passim*.

³¹ Phelan, pp. 2-3.

moment-by-moment character construction by the reader are crucial not only for an understanding of identification but of the ethics of this process.

A consideration of the ontologically synthetic nature of characterisation alongside these three branches of normative ethics sheds light on several theories of narrative empathy discussed thus far. Plato's arguments about fiction as a distraction are in some senses comparable to the demandingness objection posited by many in response to consequentialist utilitarianism – that maximizing good consequences from our actions as a moral duty might lead to what outsiders could see as supererogatory actions, whereby it might be wrong to play a video game instead of feeding a homeless person, for example.³² However, while this objection might save the notion of fiction-as-distraction from rendering fiction morally pernicious, it does not recoup fiction as a site for positive ethical engagement nor does it account for fiction's ambiguous relation to real world ethical issues. Robert Nozick's false reality 'Experience Machine' thought experiment depicts a fictional simulation where a person could experience pleasure and maximize what seems to be a utilitarian benefit even though nothing actually happens outside of the simulation.³³ Nozick argues that if all that matters in a hedonist-utilitarian sense is the maximisation of pleasure and the reduction of pain, why not remain in such a machine indefinitely? Any objection that such a machine might not 'really' change anything and that it just produces pleasurable sensations fails to adhere to hedonist-utilitarian thinking; this objection is just contrarian, based on some notion that propositions in a real sense produce better consequences than the false reality. Fiction is quite capable of temporarily bringing propositional states into being in the imaginations of readers, so the objection that fictional worlds do not establish propositions as a result of actions is not accurate. The ability of fiction to evoke and link in to real life values would also seem to allow a whole range of other consequences that utilitarian thinkers might value to come into being.

Consequentialist ethics poses little substantiated opposition to considering construction of and response to fictional characters as an ethical matter, particularly when texts such as choice-based video games are considered with their ability to allow players to explicitly alter diegetic events and bring situations into being. The arguments of my thesis will demonstrate not only that control is unstable in video games (see Chapter Two) but that novels and non-choice based texts can likewise be seen to involve what I term 'reader causality' (see Chapter Four); by this term I refer to the way in which reader/player involvement in constructing characters leads to the 'alteration' of such characters in such a way that lends aspects of the reader's own life or

³² Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Consequentialism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014), ed. by Edward N. Zalta <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/consequentialism/>> [accessed 31 August 2015].

³³ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45.

values to the character at hand. I propose the term ‘causality’ instead of ‘control’, ‘interpretation’, or ‘involvement’, and so on in order to better highlight the broad philosophical orientation I argue to be a common element to all such terms, allowing for a range of reader behaviours that bring things into being in a fictional sense due to implicit and explicit reader action. By demonstrating the commonalities as well as the distinctions between video games and novels throughout this thesis, I build to a conclusion that will determine that fictional consequences are still an ethical matter when considered in and of themselves due to this concept of reader causality, even aside from ‘real world’ mimetic and thematic ramifications.

Such mimetic and thematic aspects of character as defined by Phelan in *Reading People* *Reading Plots* still prevent any pure sense of the synthetic ‘in and of itself’, rendering such a consideration a hermeneutic tool for exploring the ethics of fiction as opposed to a separable reality for readers. The inseparability of many of these elements could be said to account for the persistence of debates surrounding various ways of considering character; in this light, Phelan’s tripartite model of characterisation has as much to do with incorporating antagonistic positions for the purposes of resolving theoretical disputes – those who argue for characters as collections of values versus those who place far greater emphasis upon their mimetic person-like aspect – as it does with creating a theory of character beyond prior arguments. Phelan admits a leaning towards the mimetic model in this debate whilst accounting for thematic elements as part of his main goal. However, almost two decades after this work, value-centric models of character and similar debates persist in the work of writers such as Richard Walsh.

In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007), Walsh argues that using mimetic representational models of character as our criteria for emotional investment and emotional response does not make sense conceptually speaking — we feel emotion in response to phrases and values before a character has been fully established in a mimetic model, and what is a character but the values and ideas attached to him or her? According to Walsh, the reader’s feeling that they feel emotion for an individual rather than in response to values associated within an individual emerges as a by-product of interpretation, not as the beginning of the chain. He writes:

Emotional involvement is the recognition of values inherent in the discursive information given by a narrative rather than in the actuality of the characters this information generates. It is a response founded upon the idea of innocence, for example, rather than upon the innocent girl to which that idea contributes [...] it is grounded in semiosis rather than representational illusion [...] In this sense, character can be understood as integrating the mimetic paradigm of being with the textual paradigm of meaning: fictional being follows, and is itself the realization of, the evaluative emotional dynamic of fictional narrative. Character, viewed from a rhetorical perspective, is in fact no more than characterisation itself. [...] Instead of saying that reader’s emotional response to the fortunes of a character are the result of involvement

with a represented person, it assumes that their emotions attach to the particular complex of meanings constituting that character.³⁴

To Walsh's arguments I would add that the reader's belief that they are responding to individuals is not so easily discarded; whether in a mimetic or synthetic sense, characters are viewed by the majority of readers as individuals and logically this is likely to have some impact upon the reader's emotional response even if much of that response emerges from values evoked by the text as opposed to a concern for a real individual. It could even be argued that this tendency of readers can be used to account for the ability of fictional arguments to achieve reader agreement and investment to a greater degree than factual arguments. Even if we do differentiate between what is actually happening in our experiences with narrative and what readers *think* happens as the *product* of narrative experiences, the fact that readers think certain things occur in the narrative experience is crucial to understanding fiction's effects.

Rather than debating whether the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of character are dominant, each element can be viewed as interdependent upon the others to the point of each term being a hermeneutic tool for theory as opposed to representing a lived reality for reading experiences. If the presence of these elements is taken as a given, however, these hermeneutic tools are still required for ethical analysis, as whether we consider synthetic or mimetic implications of a given reading experience affects the question of the ethics of identification a great deal. A comparatively neglected brand of narratology in character theories derived from the social sciences becomes illustrative here as a prior attempt to consider the similarities between real-life social interaction and the processing of fictional characters. Marilyn B. Brewer's 'dual-process' theory stands as a particularly influential model for narrative studies.³⁵ Brewer describes how most social interactions involve the consideration of newly encountered individuals as part of pre-existing categories within our minds, forming mental impressions of the encountered person that may or may not be altered according to the extent to which the person defies their categorisation. Brewer further describes how, if such categorisation is not possible or we are somehow encouraged to avoid categorisation, we may instead consider some people as individuals from our very first encounters. Cognitive theories of literary characterisation by Richard Gerrig, David Allbritton, Ralf Schneider, and Herbert Grabes suggest these models of processing information related to 'real life' individuals can also be used

³⁴ Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), p. 158.

³⁵ Marilyn B. Brewer, 'A Dual Process Model of Impression Formation', in *Advances in Social Cognition. Vol 1: A Dual Process Model of Impression Formation*, ed. by Thomas K. Srull and Robert S. Wyer, Jr. (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988), pp. 1-36 (pp. 2-6).

to explore reader construction of literary characters.³⁶ Schneider modifies the terminology used by Brewer, Gerrig, and Allbritton to suggest that most reader construction of character involves stages of categorisation, individuation, and decategorisation, with categorisation occurring in light not only of social stereotypes but also of prior literary texts and genre codes the reader has encountered. This initial stage of character construction can therefore be seen as heavily invested in ideological assumptions on the reader's part about such things as gender, race, nationality, socioeconomic status, and more. Individuation, decategorisation and personalisation only occur once more specific details are encountered about a character to discourage such generic stereotyping.

These ideas represent something similar to that which Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as a hermeneutic circle, in which prior prejudices affect how new information is received which in turn alters those original prejudices and affects thought moving forward.³⁷ As with my earlier proposition of the term 'inferred authority' in relation to what a reader or a player might believe a text is asking them to do, sequence likewise operates here as a crucial part of how we parse and construct characters in our minds. However, such theories as those regarding Brewer's work rarely address the specifically fictional nature of these exchanges and how they might therefore differ ethically from real-world interactions, once again rather problematically for a consequentialism that would exclude fictional ethics as it suggests little difference between the real and the fictional other than the terms themselves. What is unaccounted for is the ontological difference between what it means to be a real person and what it means to be a fictional person, although the human inability to know or understand the thoughts and subjectivity of other humans means this ontological difference is partly inaccessible to analysis.

We can however put forward the following initial hypotheses based upon the above. Firstly, readers appear to feel empathy for literary characters and create opinions about their behaviour, yet these literary characters are nothing more than words sequentially arranged on a page without existence beyond this. Therefore, the behaviour the reader recreates in his or her mind echoes real world behaviour understood by the reader in his or her own unique way, and likewise the empathy the reader feels for a literary character is to a limited extent similar to how the reader might respond to real-life non-fictional individuals. Therefore, even if fiction might only nudge opinions and judgements about individuals in certain directions, succeeding more

³⁶ Richard Gerrig and David Allbritton, 'The Construction of Literary Character: A View from Cognitive Psychology', *Style*, 24.3 (1990), 380-91; Ralf Schneider, 'Towards a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction', *Style*, 35.4 (2001), 607-40; Herbert Grabes, 'Encountering People through Literature', *REAL*, 24 (2008), 125-39.

³⁷ Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, 'Hermeneutics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/hermeneutics/>> [accessed 31 August 2015].

with some than with others and often merely confirming or strengthening an existing social bias or potential opinion within the given readership, the way someone responds to and constructs a fictional character can be seen to some extent to reflect the reader's already existent real-life ethics and prejudices if these initial hypotheses are correct, as an unconscious mirror to the reader's mind. Unlike the 'empathy-altruism' hypothesis where fiction leads us to good deeds or censoring fears of 'psychic infection', literary identification might not produce such dramatic effects. However, neither is identification necessarily meaningless or a subject unworthy or incapable of study. Instead, this thesis will ask a straightforward question with complex results – what happens if we view fiction itself as a site of ethical action, rather than ask what fiction may or may not cause in 'real life' after one has finished reading a text? What if instead of evading fictionality or neutering the synthetic in an attempt to shift the discussion of ethics into other arenas, it was precisely in the ontology of fictional character as co-constructed by the reader that we find the potential for good or ill? In the first chapter of this thesis, I will begin exploring this question through an examination of how exactly possible readers might feel about such co-construction of characters with what they infer to be the power structures behind a text that sanction any readings they might produce.

CHAPTER ONE: Authority in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and Marc Saporta's *Hopscotch*

1. Introduction

As posited in the introduction of my thesis, the role of sequence in identification and reader construction of characters is of paramount importance in understanding these processes; due to the naturalised common-sensical nature of sequence to many readers, however, it is difficult to use 'normative' sequenced prose texts to clearly explore what seems straightforward in this manner. On the other hand, to use multiple-sequence video games as the initial foundation for this thesis might encourage a misleading impression of radical difference between prose novels and video games in addition to suggesting that games are my prime focus. Instead, I intend to use similarities between the media to make claims primarily about readers of novels, and it is easier to do this if I proceed from such source material as my initial point of departure (as, indeed, I do in all chapters of this thesis but for the final chapter where I reverse this sequence).

Appropriate source material for my initial analysis can be found in a loose group of experimental novels that problematize sequence by offering multiple routes through the text (in a similar manner to the multiple paths available in video games) yet nevertheless with the constraints and affordances of an exclusively prose-based medium. This formal disruption throws into relief the operation of normative sequential processes but so too does the fictionality of these texts raise consequentialist and deontological ethical issues that might not be as apparent if they were found in set-sequence texts. In this chapter I analyse three prose texts that disrupt traditional sequence in different ways through invitations to obey various kinds of inferred authority – either by offering explicit instructions to read the novel by flicking between different sections (Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*), by *necessitating* a random pathway through the text through lack of book binding (B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*), or by offering multiple sections that might be read in different sequences depending upon one's familiarity with various genres and therefore produce a range of likely inferences as to what readers might infer the text's authority is asking them to do in their interpretation and identification (Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962)).

In each text, the role of chance serves to foreground the importance of reader-inferred authority by making the reader aware that there is, indeed, a choice, that one does not have to read a text in a specific sequence as most novels seem to demand. These experimental texts likewise simultaneously impart a greater sense of freedom and therefore responsibility upon the reader

for his or her sense of action and the consequences of those actions. Moreover, these three novels thematise the relationship between reader identification, ethics, and perception in a diegetic sense (the protagonist of each text finds it particularly difficult to ‘read’ other human beings) and in a technical sense (the sequences that compose these texts represent the protagonists’ inability to properly represent their experience). This chapter will use these multiple sequences in order to explore how identification and character construction are contingent upon the possibilities permitted by sequences and how readers themselves are responsible for inferring such authorities from the possibilities made likely (but not necessitated) by the text. On this basis, this chapter will make certain foundational hypotheses as to the operations of reader construction of character that will underpin my arguments throughout this thesis as to the nature and ethics of this process.

2. The Ethics of Categorisation in B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*

To read any prose novel is to bring together and synthesise disparate details from a given sequence in the text; to read B.S. Johnson’s 1969 autobiographical novel *The Unfortunates* is to perform this reconstruction in a particularly explicit and self-aware fashion. The narrative is composed of a series of bound sections contained within a box, with all the sections but the first and last readable in random order. They present Johnson’s reflections on the death of his friend Tony Tillinghast from cancer and his memories of the city in which they spent time together, with the random chance-based form of the novel’s sequences acting as a tangible metaphor for both the workings of memory and the metastasis of cancer. The novel is a mixture of fiction and non-fiction and regards topics that traditionally evoke both social and narrative empathy, as witnessed by the success of such novels as John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012).³⁸ It is notable in contrast that *The Unfortunates* has been met with partial or absent empathetic responses for some of its characters, particularly its most fictional character, Wendy, who is based on a real-life girlfriend of Johnson’s but with a name alteration and other changes. Wendy’s arguably misogynistic portrayal in the narrative simultaneously evokes a set of urgent real-world socio-political issues at the same time as she stands as the least ontologically real character both in terms of her fictionality and in the amount of detail given about her in the text for the reader to reassemble as a person.

In the critical response to this novel, there have been reported problems with the sense of characters’ reality and depth, which is perhaps surprising considering the real-life nature of many of the events reported. If narrative empathy is for some an integral part of the process of

³⁸ John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars* (London: Penguin, 2013).

literary reading, then something appears to be wrong with Johnson's novel. In his biography of Johnson, Jonathan Coe notes that in many reviews of *The Unfortunates* 'the same reservations kept recurring' regarding Johnson's characters. He cites Richard Holmes' claim that the text's 'technical self-absorption – for both author and reader – is finally at the expense of the reality of other lives', which are said to 'blow away like loose leaves in the wind', and Julian Jebb's view that the novel's characters have 'peculiarly little concrete life. They seem more like visitors to a consciousness than individuals encountered, observed and described'.³⁹ Not only have readers found this novel difficult, but the novel's lack of signposting of its own partly non-fictional status combined with its novelistic style and experimentation with chance can be said to potentially contribute to the lack of authenticating force its autobiographical status might have given the novel. Holmes's comment suggests that the novel's experimental technical aspect is to some extent to blame for these 'leaf'-like and unreal characterisations; likewise, there is a similar emphasis in Philip Pacey's claim that the tactile nature of *The Unfortunates* acts as a Brechtian alienation effect inasmuch as it makes the reader aware that they are reading a book,⁴⁰ and also in David Lodge's suggestion that the novel's form 'advantageously' puts painful 'real' experience at an aesthetic distance.⁴¹

However, as Kaye Mitchell claims, the novel's multiple possible sequences do not necessarily create radically different readings from one another despite the apparent promise latent in its randomised form, as there is a lack of evidence to demonstrate such variant readings.⁴² Yet as I posited in the introduction of my thesis, sequence logically plays a key role in reader construction of character; if Mitchell is correct, then either my hypothesis is faulty or some element is missing from her analysis that might account for the importance of sequence in the text even if radically different readings are not created by different readers. As I will argue, sequence can and should be explored as to the effects it produces on the micro-level of prose style in tandem with macro-level mechanics such as *The Unfortunates*' book-in-a-box format. A combination of close-reading and macro-level narrative concepts – zooming in and out as required – can be used to demonstrate the nuanced and subtle effects of sequence in many texts that might have eluded critics searching for more dramatic results in variant sequences such as those presented by *The Unfortunates*.

In support of my claim regarding the importance of micro-level style, recent work on *The Unfortunates* has highlighted the novel's unusual prose style, an element which has been

³⁹ Jonathan Coe, *Like A Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (Oxford: Picador, 2005), p. 269.

⁴⁰ Philip Pacey, 'Merely Human – The Writings of B.S. Johnson', *Stand*, 13.2 (1972), 61-64 (p. 63)

⁴¹ David Lodge, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads', *Critical Quarterly*, 2 (1969), 105-32 (p. 114)

⁴² Kaye Mitchell, 'The Unfortunates: Hypertext, Linearity and the Act of Reading', *Re-reading B.S. Johnson*, ed. by Philip Tew and Glyn White (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 51-64 (p. 56)

underrepresented in the novel's criticism perhaps due to the more obvious distraction of its unusual book-in-a-box format. The sense of movement implied in reviews that suggest the novel's characters 'blow away' and pass through both the reader's and Johnson's minds as 'visitors' finds a stylistic analogue in the prose of *The Unfortunates*. As Julia Jordan has demonstrated, Johnson's typical sentence structure is marked by a host of qualifications and repetitions which mark a doomed and unstable attempt to depict the particularity of events, and in the end underline the narrative's inability to present the material it addresses. Jordan suggests that 'each sentence contains its own first – and sometimes second and third – draft'.⁴³ The temporary, provisional, and transitory nature of the resulting draft-like prose is one factor we can link to the problematized and almost absent narrative empathy found in response to some of the novel's characters in the aforementioned reviews, with the style giving the characters an apparent lack of concrete reality. Johnson drafts these characters in a kind of paraphrase, with direct speech, physical description, personal histories, and statements alluding to often absent or problematized interior feeling.

As I explored in this thesis's introduction, Marilynn B. Brewer's model of interpersonal human interaction has been imported into narrative studies by Ralf Schneider to show how different readers might individualise newly encountered characters or place them into pre-existing social categories and stereotypes within their minds. In *The Unfortunates*, it is significant that the two other main characters aside from Johnson and Tony are women and that they are afforded less narrative explication than the two male protagonists yet simultaneously recur at key points in the narrative's development. Reviews of the novel bear out a difference in response to the two sets of characters, suggesting a distinction in the way the text seems to invite response to male and female characters. Something about this novel's style and process of characterisation seems to disrupt processes of identification and narrative empathy for all characters and for female characters in particular, and therefore it may not be so simple a matter to conveniently attribute this disruption wholly to the novel's unusual form.

While Coe judges cancer patient Tony and narrator Johnson to represent a 'vortex of shared grief' in their struggle, he instead deems the recurrent Wendy archetype in Johnson's writings (based on the real-life Muriel Starkey) to be boring and overblown.⁴⁴ If we explore the substance of Wendy's appearances in the novel, *The Unfortunates* contains various statements that could be inferred to idealise or objectify its leading female character Wendy ('leading' considering the greater amount of space and affective effort in the narration devoted towards

⁴³ Julia Jordan, "'For recuperation': Elegy, Form, and the Aleatory in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*", *Textual Practice*, 28.5 (2014), 745-761 (p. 746).

⁴⁴ Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 23, p. 83.

Wendy than towards the character of June), or damn Wendy for her behaviour in her relationship with Johnson; these include apparent generalisations about the role of women. In the section beginning ‘Up there, yes’, Johnson and Wendy attend a dinner at the home of Tony and June. After stressing how June had been ‘out at work all day long’ prior to preparing their meal, the narrator issues himself (and the reader) with an imperative: ‘Remember Wendy did not do anything domestic to help. She was not like that’ (‘Up there, yes’, p. 5).⁴⁵ These remarks are ethically problematic: Wendy might not have offered to help, yet what of Tony or even Johnson himself? Why allow the moment to lead to a brief summary of Wendy’s history as being entirely dependent upon a mother who did not teach her how to cook or sew, as if these were essential human virtues?

The inference here is that in past situations, and indeed in future situations, it would be unlikely for Wendy to be *the kind of person* who would engage in an action such as helping June if the opportunity arose. Likewise the use of the imperative ‘remember’ here suggests that if Wendy does not perform according to Johnson’s expectations of the functions of the female gender, then this is something that Johnson should not forget and indeed should ‘remember’ with imperative force. These suggestions by Johnson as both narrator and author of the text form an intrinsic part of the reader’s conceptualisation of Wendy, as we have no means of accessing her character other than the details Johnson imparts. Regardless of whether the text refers to someone real, as most readers will not know of or see Wendy in any other text or real life, the ‘Wendy’ produced in readers’ minds *is* fictional for all intents and purposes as an act of make-believe. There is no possibility of gaining more information about Wendy other than that which is provided, and so to make sense of the novel, readers must provisionally accept and be limited by the text’s inferred authority even if they reject it afterwards.

No section of *The Unfortunates* goes on to personalise Wendy sufficiently to remove her from this initial stage or position of being ‘like that’, as someone who does not fit the values associated by the novel with her social role. Johnson does not redraft Wendy in his subsequent sentences as he does with so many other impressions in his novel – including descriptions of buildings, bodies, and events – by narrowing down her behaviour in specific ways to make her more of a person and less of a stereotype. Instead, he merely claims that the impression might in some sense be inaccurate – ‘perhaps I exaggerate in my bitterness, perhaps I am unjust’ (‘Up there, yes’, p. 5) – only to complete this tricolon of drafts by bringing the sentiment back to its original position, that Wendy is indeed ‘like that’ kind of person in this specific instance: ‘But

⁴⁵ B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (Oxford: Picador, 1999). Due to the unusual format of this text, references to this edition will be given in parentheses after each quotation, with the first few words of the relevant pamphlet followed by the page number within that given section.

certainly she did nothing to help June on this occasion.’ This idea of judgement, of being ‘unjust’, of amalgamating one’s memories of actions on various occasions into some proof that someone is or is not concretely like something, is encouraged by the reader’s elision of different moments in a sequence of characterising details into a single unified character. Misogynistic readings are again simultaneously limited and encouraged by the way Johnson questions his character’s knowability beyond these actions. He asks ‘How did she feel, it was often so difficult to know how she was feeling, what she felt?’ (‘Up there, yes’, p. 8); even as this rhetorical question suggests his interpretation of her character might be inaccurate, it further depersonalises Wendy and casts her as unknowable.

This initial drafting of Wendy resembles in its effects what Alexandra Georgakopoulou terms ‘small stories’: ‘an umbrella-term that covers a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to feelings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell’.⁴⁶ Small stories are often incomplete, deferred, and provisional narratives which establish the kernel of a story only to leave it unfinished, as opposed to the ‘big’ stories found in large autobiographical life-story summations. We encounter analogous situations constantly in literature when the small stories of minor characters briefly cross the radar of the focalisers’ ‘big stories’; the comparison with the life stories of the social sciences is particularly productive here in relation to *The Unfortunates*’ pseudo-status as an autobiographical text. A small story, as the beginning of a moment of characterisation upon which we see little expansion, affords enough opportunity for the reader to process Wendy as representing a category of a certain kind of person. Many of the characters found in *The Unfortunates* are likely to afford the possibility only of what the character theorist Schneider calls categorisation, where readers sometimes fit new characters into generic categories of types of people but may later on individuate and de-categorize characters after more information is gained. Partial forms of the later stages in Schneider’s schema may or may not be attainable here, depending upon the sequence read, but the multiplicity of possible sequences itself renders any normative form of dramatic arc or ordered development unlikely.

Alex Woloch’s *The One Vs. The Many* (2003) argues that ‘character-space’, the amount of characterisation an individual in a novel is given in comparison with other characters, can be manipulated to mount arguments about the nature of particular types of individuals or societies.⁴⁷ *The Unfortunates* represents an even greater complication of Woloch’s theory, as the

⁴⁶ Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), p. vii.

⁴⁷ Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 12-14.

sense of how much character-space has been devoted to a particular character might be distorted depending upon reading sequence and how frequently references are encountered. Character-space can furthermore be linked to my theory of readers inferring authority from a given text's sequence; in the scenario presented in this novel, for example, the inferred authority of character-space can be seen as gender-biased, stereotyping the kind of empathy so often gendered in theories of narrative empathy into a Madonna-whore complex. Reader construction of these characters appears to not only reflect real-world judgements of women but also clearly emerges from certain stylistic and sequential choices, allowing a case-study in these effects. As a novel with no set sequence, something unanticipated by much work on characterisation to date, *The Unfortunates* affords an unexpected test-case to explore the importance of the contingency of sequence for all of these theories. Furthermore, the novel highlights the utility of applying Georgakopoulou's 'small stories' concept to existing narrative theories of characterisation, hinting at the way in which deferred, cut-off, and provisional narratives may provide a highly ideologically-driven basis for initial character assessment in the reader's mind, echoing the original critical move made in importing another social sciences concept into narrative theory where Brewer's dual-process model was translated into Schneider's schema of character response.

Johnson's remarks as narrator in the passages I have been highlighting may be taken as misogyny ('Johnson has negative views on women in general'), or as indicating the interpretative difficulty he encounters in trying to remember what human beings are like, including whether Wendy was or was not how he recalls her. When readers try to assess whether Johnson's remarks are misogynist or not, it could be hypothesised that readers may draw on their own prior prejudices and on the generalisations they may have framed in response to textual gaps encountered in a given sequence. This can be demonstrated through comparison with the avant-garde continental predecessor of *The Unfortunates*, Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1962), which also takes the form of a 'book in a box' (in Saporta's novel, each page can be read in any random order). *Composition No. 1* has no unifying narrative theme comparable to Tony's cancer. While some characters recur, its events and images bear no clear relation to any coherent narrative whole. Just as with *The Unfortunates*, the novel's reception history suggests that its characters are problematic. The Oulipo group deemed Saporta's work 'no good, although there is undeniably a structure there'.⁴⁸ Johnson himself read Saporta's work whilst creating his own, and conceived of *The Unfortunates* as in part a 'modified form of Saporta's technique', superior inasmuch as each section in his work would be at 'whatever length the material dictates' as opposed to the 'arbitrary' single pages of *Composition No 1*.⁴⁹ In his review

⁴⁸ *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. by Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 2011), p. 194.

⁴⁹ Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 231.

of *Composition No. 1*'s modern reprinting, Coe echoes the comments about 'technical self-absorption' and lack of solidity that were made in the original reviews of *The Unfortunates*, applying them to Saporta:

The wispieness is a frequent pitfall of experimental fiction: its authors can become so preoccupied or enamoured with their technical innovation that the content itself remains underdeveloped. Readers will certainly not find here the solid satisfaction of *The Unfortunates*, the sense of charged memories willed into recollection, or personal grief rendered so honestly.⁵⁰

In this contrast, it is the figure of Johnson himself, his will and personal grief, that Coe invokes against the comparatively underdeveloped consciousness of *Composition No. 1*'s protagonist. The contrast does not apply to the other characters of *The Unfortunates*. In both novels, the majority of peripheral characters are women, and in both, most of them are heavily categorised according to their gender, presenting a useful contrast in terms of how both novels might generate these effects and also suggestive of something about the way postmodern male writers of the 1960s perceived the opposite gender.

In *The Unfortunates*, these depictions of women are clearly focalised through Johnson as character and narrator. The question of focalisation is much less clear in *Composition No. 1*. The arbitrary and incoherent nature of Saporta's narration is accentuated in the most widely available edition of the text recently produced by Visual Editions in 2011.⁵¹ As Coe notes in his review, this edition 'bizarrely' omits a key page of instructions, which originally featured the only direct reference to the novel's protagonist in the entire text. In a documentary blog about the making of this edition, the publisher provides a scan of the instructions page accompanied by the comment: 'Original instructions to "the reader". But we doubt we'll do the same'.⁵² The decision to remove these instructions has very specific effects on the text, rather as if the section labelled 'First' were to be removed from *The Unfortunates*. In *Composition No. 1*, there is no framing point of departure for the reader, it is not exactly clear when diegetic events are occurring in relation to one another, and the relevance of each page in relation to other pages is likewise unclear. While *The Unfortunates* tries to offer what Jordan terms 'a mimetically truthful representation of how memory is experienced randomly' through the sequences the

⁵⁰ Jonathan Coe, 'Composition No 1 by Marc Saporta - review', *The Guardian*, 28 October 2011
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/28/composition-no-1-saporta-review>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

⁵¹ Marc Saporta, *Composition No 1*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Visual Editions, 2011). Due to the unusual format of this novel, references to this edition will be given in the text with the first few words of the relevant one-page pamphlet used to indicate the passage discussed.

⁵² Visual Editions, 'In Process', *Flickr*, 24 June 2010
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/visualeditions/4729588107/in/set-72157623803702355>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

book generates, the missing instruction page from *Composition No. 1* reveals that the fragmented text is supposed to form the order of a man's life, with the very story itself altering upon different readings.⁵³

In the original instructions for *Composition No. 1*, the chance-element in reading this text is compared to both a game and an act of fate, with the reader dealing the 'deck of cards ... as at a fortuneteller's'; however whereas the traditional tarot is believed to reveal a pre-existent fate, dealing here is conceived of as *determining* this fate: 'The order the pages then assume will orient X's fate.' The instructions of *Composition No. 1* reveal that the entire narrative relates to a particular protagonist, named 'X' for his indeterminate nature. The text as a whole contains few markers of X's presence; rather, it recounts other characters' interactions with X, without direct reference to X himself beyond reference to ownerless limbs, sense perceptions, and occasional hypotheses as to how a certain person in certain situations might 'perhaps' respond to a given situation. Thus without this instruction page the majority of modern readers may well not even realise X exists. However, this does not mean that readers will not try to recuperate those fragments into a coherent albeit depersonalised whole as an act of unifying interpretation. While I am not arguing that the term 'interpretation' is interchangeable with 'identification', all identification can be considered in part a form of character-centric interpretation involving anything relevant to the construction of a given character, following many similar rules such as an attempt to render diverse details coherent.

The instruction page goes on to describe hypothetical ways in which 'the order of the pages' may 'orient X's fate':

Nor is it a matter of indifference to know if he met his mistress Dagmar before or after his marriage; if he took advantage of Helga at the time of her adolescence or her maturity; if the theft he has committed occurred under cover of the resistance or in less troubled times; if the automobile accident in which he has been hurt is unrelated to the theft – or the rape – or if it occurred during his getaway.

The reader may struggle to infer the interconnection of events implied by such instructions from the stylistic ambiguity of each narrative segment, failing to link a rape to a 'getaway' and a theft to a resistance movement for example. The interpretation of many pages in *Composition No. 1* rests upon initial dislocation, with the reader not yet knowing at the start whether we are reading (for example) about a rape, a military action, or a theft, and the subject often remains undecidable until the page's conclusion in this manner. As each potential explanation is implicitly compared and contrasted, we learn to hold them all as possibilities until they are

⁵³ Julia Jordan, *Chance and the Modern British Novel: From Henry Green to Iris Murdoch* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 110; see Visual Editions, 'In Process' in fn. 47 for the text of the missing instruction page for *Composition No. 1*.

resolved down the page, thus suggesting to the reader the symbolic interconnectedness of all these events. Even when it comes, interpretative resolution is partial. The narrative voice may suggest that ‘perhaps’ certain things are the case, as it does twice in the page beginning ‘A sputter in the telephone receiver’. The second such instance, the rape of Helga, is of evident importance, situated as it is here in relation to the life of X – albeit an X who may be totally unrealised by many readers (in which case there is no contextualisation of the rape as connected with the same man as was involved in such other events as a marriage, a theft, or membership of a resistance movement).

If a reader of *Composition No. 1* takes its pages in a sequence which includes many early pages relating to the rape of Helga, this will affect interpretation of later-encountered events.

Ontologically, the fictional characters here are little different to the partially non-fictional characters of *The Unfortunates*, as temporal positioning in that text is also ambiguous – an ambiguity which requires greater creative work on the reader’s part. Since many segments begin without a clear subject and readers hold multiple possibilities in mind, then whether rape has fully and repeatedly entered the narrative set of possibilities is very important, particularly given the political and affective charge it carries. Whether or not the reader even classifies the event as rape may depend upon the influence of sequence. For example, the page beginning ‘Helga is becoming aroused’ progresses for two paragraphs highlighting her enjoyment of sex before two further brief paragraphs suggest that the action began as a rape:

This is no longer a powerless child letting herself be looted, but a woman in the making who greedily collects each scrap of emotion.

Her whole body suddenly becomes vigilant, as her will dissolves.

The page’s final third emphasises the girl’s forceful agency and her enjoyment of sex, encouraging the reader to suppress outrage at the rape by appealing to notions of sexual maturation, liberation, and pleasure. If we accept this encouragement, and read this page early, then in future references to the event that include suggestions that she is not enjoying sex we may take this lack of pleasure as again a prelude to ‘liberation’. In this process, the brute fact of rape is overwritten, not exactly by the diegesis but by reader inference as to what the narrative is asking for in terms of response – an inference partly based on an entirely changeable sequence here.

The possibility of such a reading is, however, threaded through the internal logic of other sections, suggesting that they await the catalyst of a specific reading sequence being encountered for their possibilities to fully manifest. The page beginning ‘Helga no longer offers any resistance’ has an envelope structure in which an opening suggestion of pleasure – ‘She

even takes a secret pleasure in passively yielding' – leads to a final declaration of liberation: 'But youth is victorious, and the energy of a flesh that cannot keep itself from reacting. The breasts once again grow firm.' In between, Helga's body is declared 'dead' and 'broken', terms which elsewhere suggest the rape is to be viewed as a crime but which here act as a penultimate step in a dramatic arc. Elsewhere, in the passage beginning 'Helga protects her face', we see the girl 'stunned' by physical assault, compared to a 'little slave girl'; here, the reader is reminded of what the action consists in. Either sequence might allow us to convert a violent rape into a coming-of-age tale of seduction, but it is hard to escape from the reader's likely initial belief either that Helga enjoys the action, or on the contrary that this is a violent and despicable assault. Interpretation is further complicated by the narrator's self-effacement. If we believe the narrator to be omniscient, or are not even aware of a homodiegetic narrator's presence, then we may accept without question the account of Helga's sensations. However, if readers take themselves to be reading the limited subjective account of X, we may view his narration as unreliable and as reflecting X's views on women. In this case readers may link the rape to the treatment and description of X's other lovers throughout the book, and to his obsession with the female body which he presents in an overtly abstract, animalised, or sexual manner, or indeed in any combination of these three perspectives.

If there is misogyny in the way that *The Unfortunates* presents Wendy, it is of a much more casual nature. Johnson's chiding remark that Wendy was 'not like' women are expected to be in her reluctance to perform domestic tasks is made in passing and has no bearing on the central theme of Tony's cancer, and readers are unlikely to respond to it in such an affectively charged manner as they will to a rape scene. However, just as sequence may affect reader response to misogyny in *Composition No. 1* (as this analysis has shown), the same might apply to this less dramatic instance in *The Unfortunates*. We have seen that *The Unfortunates* represents a denaturalisation of standard novelistic sequences, and that *Composition No. 1* denaturalises the notion of a focaliser. Saporta's text thus highlights how the ethical responses of readers reflect back upon their acceptance of what they might infer to be the authority of the text. Even in the face of the randomised sequence found in both novels, as Kaye Mitchell noted earlier, this potential for random sequences does not feel radically different from a traditionally-sequenced novel. Readers can be seen to still operate with the same habits that define their reading of traditional texts, trying to generate coherent narration, characters, and fictional worlds that are sanctioned by the novel in question, even if the sequence followed unconsciously encourages particular inferences as to what that novel is demanding in terms of interpretation. In *The Unfortunates*, Johnson's explicit presence as narrator and character encourages even more of a sense of 'authoritative' sequence even in spite of the possibility of chance; such is the power both of reader habituation to certain reading patterns and traditional trust in the crafted

experience an author seems to provide.

Therefore Johnson as author might seem responsible for whatever misogyny might be inferred by readers. Here too, however, randomisation of sequence might similarly impact on readers' trust in the authority of the narration they build. If, for example, the passage chiding Wendy for her failure to help domestically is encountered early on in a particular reading of *The Unfortunates*, a reader inclined to regard this statement as misogynistic may view future depictions of Wendy and other women through such a frame of reference. Alternatively, a reader might encounter this section belatedly towards the end of a particular reading of the text, having already established a more entrenched view of Johnson's character that involves no sense that he is a misogynist up until this point. While such a reader may still find this statement misogynistic, it might perhaps just be one statement among many from a narrator not considered as being 'like that', or it might be distorted into the existing characterisation formed according to reader belief as to Johnson's character.

Johnson himself (either as character, narrator, or author – in all senses an 'inferred authority' synonymous with the protagonist's narration) is subject to the processes of categorisation and personalisation we bring to literary texts and everyday social interactions. These processes are denaturalised in *The Unfortunates* as the importance of sequence is highlighted, and readers are made aware of the malleability of character and of their own power in its formation. In a Brewer-derived schema, for example, if the sections we read early on focus on Johnson's friendship with Tony and his emotional response to Tony's death, a 'personalisation' response may be encouraged, whereas if a complex of Wendy passages predominates certain readers may instead 'categorise' Johnson as a misogynist and use that as the foundation for further characterisation. In either case, Johnson may be read as misogynist but the weight given to this aspect may well vary depending on the process and sequence followed. In her analysis of personalisation and categorisation responses, Brewer uses the statement 'Janet is a nurse' as an example of how these alternative models of impression formation can operate.⁵⁴ In a categorisation response, weight is placed upon the category of nurse, with Janet immediately read as an example of that category; in a personalization response, weight is placed upon the figure of Janet, with her status as nurse acting as just one factor in a multifaceted personality. Which path we take depends upon the amount of information about Janet available prior to this statement, our sense of Janet's importance in relation to our own goals as perceivers, and our own social stereotypes. So too does this framework apply to our reading of Johnson's comments on women.

⁵⁴ Brewer, p. 22.

To take another example, Johnson elsewhere juxtaposes Wendy with the appearance of June, writing of one meeting that June was ‘the same as ever, calm, tall, elegantly unglamorous, honest, realistic, infinitely supporting’ (‘For recuperation’, p.3). The implicit comparison that emerges from the presence of such different women implies that these attributes are not merely praiseworthy but are those Johnson believes women in general should have, as an ideal contrasted with Wendy’s actions. Nicolas Tredell claims that Wendy occupies a ‘phallogentric mythology in which women are split into Madonnas and whore-witches’.⁵⁵ Referring to the two passages we have been discussing, where Wendy does not help with domestic tasks and June is ‘infinitely supporting’, Tredell notes that women are ‘subjected to male discursive constructions ... contrasted with this “bad” woman [Wendy] are “good” women – all, significantly, maternal figures’.⁵⁶ The contrast which informs this observation is not automatic: it must emerge from a reader’s attentiveness, from close juxtaposition, or from a combination of both. Readers will more readily respond to the text as encoding gendered assumptions if earlier sections have encouraged them to do so, a behaviour I will explore in greater detail in Chapter Three of this thesis in relation to the male gaze and Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love* (1997). Both nuance and force of judgement arrive through sequence; indeed, this was Johnson’s favoured method of composition, throwing together various notes for novels in different orders and acknowledging that accidental sequences ‘often dictate juxtapositions which weren’t there by design’.⁵⁷ As an ironic but logical consequence of this, different sequences can encourage readers to take issue with what they perceive to be Johnson’s treatment of women, even if Johnson did not seek such a reaction, or intend to focus on female characters in what is, after all, an elegy for Tony and a reflection on Johnson’s own status as elegist.

Critics have tended to situate Johnson’s approach to women within philosophical and cultural contexts, rather than in relation to his self-representation within his own works (which would in a Brewer-derived model perhaps demonstrate a personalisation rather than a categorisation response to Johnson). Despite observing a Madonna-Whore complex in his work, Tredell does not judge Johnson’s treatment of women in terms of the individual personality of the author:

In considering the representation of women in Johnson’s texts, this study does not intend to indict him, as an individual, for ‘sexist’ attitudes; his attitudes were, in many respects, characteristic of certain widespread discursive constructions of femininity at the time they were written, and indeed for centuries back in Western culture.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson*, 2nd Edition (Nottingham: Paupers’ Press, 2010), p. 134.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁷ *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods*, ed. by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Allison and Busby, 1981), p. 87.

⁵⁸ Tredell, pp. 31-32.

Philip Tew repeatedly makes an equivalent argument in his analysis of Johnson's work, situating Johnson's textual representations of women in a larger philosophical discourse on modernity. In one instance, he extrapolates the commodification of women to the 'commodification of human relations' in general.⁵⁹ He takes the view that in *Trawl* (1966), Johnson's 'disgust and self-loathing' are 'extended to any women generally of promiscuous sexuality [echoing] his uneasiness with the exterior, with the surrounding world, the breaking of the boundaries of subjectivised identity and corporeality', and suggests regarding the novel's reduction of women to 'ciphers' that 'the sexual and its commodified presence is a paradigm of modernity more generally'.⁶⁰ Johnson himself broadens his treatment of women from their specificity as characters to a representation of femininity as a concept. After describing June, Johnson speaks of his 'failure to find anyone to replace [Wendy], to be as good as she was, or as I had thought she was, had made her out to be' ('For recuperation', p. 3). The description suggests that she is not an individual, irreplaceable person for Johnson, but a set of functions and attributes that constitute her female identity, what he 'had made her out to be'. His 'grief' is not about Wendy as a person, but is about himself and his prejudices: he says it was 'the loss I wanted, the self-suffering, not her' ('For recuperation', p. 3).

Although Johnson or others may attempt to transform statements about women into broader comments on culture and subjectivity, it is precisely Johnson's treatment of women that allows us to grasp how the novel's different possible sequences may matter in a politically urgent way. There is more at stake here than Johnson's real-life feelings on an ex-girlfriend, but a malignant cancer throughout fiction whereby female characters are frequently rendered ontologically 'lesser' or distinct from male characters. Through the different ways in which writers can be seen to treat male and female characters differently within their fictions, we can better understand the workings of identification as a whole through such contrasts. The move by prior critics of Johnson's work to attribute misogynistic aspects of texts to the misogyny of contemporary culture at large is suspect. Johnson is not solely a disembodied product of his culture; he proclaims textually and narratively the extent to which he stands apart and can be judged as an individual. Even though his misogyny is undercut by the avowal that his judgement is tentative and unsure, this does not erase his initial impulse, a gesture by which the reader may in turn construct an idea of his character. Johnson's judgement of Wendy as not 'like' the kind of person who would help domestically may distance the reader from the text, and lead us to read Johnson's performed failures to understand others as indicative of a certain kind of personality rather than of an existential condition.

⁵⁹ Philip Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 104.

⁶⁰ Tew, p. 188.

In one of her hypotheses for further study, Suzanne Keen claims that:

Both authors' empathy and readers' empathy have rhetorical uses, which come more readily to notice when they conflict in instances of empathic inaccuracy (discordance arising from gaps between an author's intention and a reader's experience of narrative empathy). Experiences of empathic inaccuracy may contribute to a reader's outraged sense that the author's perspective is simply wrong...⁶¹

How 'readily' aspects of *The Unfortunates* come to notice may result from sequential choices, but readers may fail to respond to Johnson's invitation to empathise with his grief over Wendy and his view of her personality even as they empathise with his response to Tony's illness and death. We have seen that for Coe, to read of Tony and Johnson 'is to be drawn, inexorably, by the coiled, unyielding threads of Johnson's prose, into a vortex of shared grief'.⁶² Wendy's marginalised status as a small story within the narrative stands as a contrapuntal theme; Johnson's 'grief' over a failed relationship is a lesser matter than the great grief he experiences over a cancer patient's death. The narrative's devices encourage even non-misogynistic readers to engage in potentially misogynistic and marginalising processes in responding to Wendy's character, inasmuch as readers try to understand what the novel appears to be asking them to do.

Although the ontological nature of these characters as fictional might mean no real person is affected by reader construction of character and judgements as to behaviour in these texts, is misogyny merely evaluated on its effects on real individuals? Or, by its definition as a category-based attack eliding individual difference between women, should misogyny be evaluated ethically by the harm it perpetuates towards a category? If gender categories are in part performance and culture-based, then what is the meaningful distinction between physical and written performance of gender and response to it? In these senses, the reader's engagement in the text's misogyny could be seen as deontologically wrong unless we engage a 'fictional' caveat to separate the fictional action from the real, but if gender is in part enacted through behaviour and self-definition, then what is the meaningful difference here? Indeed, the synthetic nature of characterisation might further problematize such character construction as more than just misogynistic response but as ontologically limiting fictional women to the reality of the author and reader's whim.

The only safe harbour for a reader accused of unethical behaviour in recreating the text's misogynistic processes of categorising women might rest in the abdication of responsibility – that the authors Saporta and Johnson are misogynist, not the reader who recreates their texts.

⁶¹ Keen, p. xiii.

⁶² Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 23.

However, as my analysis has demonstrated reader complicity in this recreation, deontologically-speaking readers might engage in unethical behaviour here even if in a virtue-ethics sense readers did not intend to do so or even if they intended to repudiate the text's depictions after making sense of them by staging them within their minds. To use a popular culture analogy, in the film *The Ring* (2002), viewers of a particular film die shortly after watching it; viewing leads to death.⁶³ Here, reading texts that engage readers in re-creating certain patterns of thought in response to inferring characters from sequences and the gaps in sequences can be seen as leading to outcomes that can be ethically judged. Not all fictional mimicry of real life social situations and behaviour can necessarily be deemed a matter for ethical judgement on the reader's part in terms of fictional recreation – for example, murder in a novel affects no real person, a criterion of murder's unethical status as affecting a real specific individual. Misogyny, however, as a *category* and non-individual based ethical matter that exists as an already cultural performance act, can be seen as a fictional action where the reader is more clearly culpable for ethical judgement; therefore throughout my thesis I will persist in analysing similar situations in order to more clearly understand the workings and ethics of reader construction of character.

The birth of Johnson is the death of Wendy; the sequencing of a novel is the death of a reader's radical freedom to create his or her own idea of a fictional character, a character who only ontologically 'exists' insofar as that sequence establishes his or her nature. Is it then possible to see Johnson as unfairly provoking a misogynist reading of a woman's nature when Johnson is the creator of that character and that world, when the very rules of that fictional world might lead readers to infer that in some senses it would be 'correct' to view characters in that manner? Even partially successful narrative empathy, even simple attempts to understand a novel, might lead to the temporary establishment and acceptance of an ethics contrary to the reader's own, and in so doing, the reader's own understanding of ethical possibilities will be used to define his or her belief in what the novel is saying. If fiction can make readers temporarily good people, can fiction make us bad? If consequentialism is applied to this, if readers are not influenced or 'trained' to commit further misogynistic categorisations there might be no real problem, but deontologically, if misogyny is categorically unethical, then the decision to read a novel that might engage a reader in perpetuating such processes could be seen as leading to an unethical situation. It could be argued that consequently readers might conversely be trained to recognise, understand, and avert themselves from such thought patterns, but this is perhaps dependent upon the reader's pre-existing ethics to some extent, so there is not necessarily any such alteration. We could therefore and perhaps surprisingly be led to a situation where to decide to read a book in some senses might be undesirable for what we might do as a result, even if the reader does not want to even temporarily adopt and practice values other than their own, unless further

⁶³ *The Ring*, dir. by Gore Verbinski (Universal Pictures, 2002).

examination of other instances of fictional ethics can better explain and elucidate this situation.

3. The Ontology of Fictional Being in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

As seen with *Composition No 1*'s ambiguously absent narrator 'Mr X', pronouns, proper nouns, and other naming conventions suggest to readers that certain parts of texts are 'supposed' to be read as mimetically referring to people, and without many of these referents characters might not be generated in a stable form by readers. These fictional people are often -- unless information is given to the contrary -- read as having a stable and continuous existence, with each reference to an individual taken to refer to the same individual as previous references with that name within a sequence; we do not imagine, when reading 'Superman', that subsequent iterations of 'Superman' are suddenly not the same character unless the text indicates otherwise, and might feel cheated if such a thing were to suddenly be revealed. If a text is a tapestry of interwoven threads, as Barthes suggests it is in 'The Death of the Author', then readers can be seen to knit together characterisation statements;⁶⁴ we create unnecessary continuities, believing in the inferred authority's representations and control of the text, but also that these characters are unified whole persons rather than a mess of fragments, and thus provide missing details until the text delivers them.

We infer the Iserian gaps between moments of characterisation, between details unsaid, and incorporate each new detail of characterisation into the structure formed up to that point, or alter our existing inferences in light of new information. This gapping does not usually lead to radically free interpretation; although nothing technically prevents a reader from, for example, deciding that Homer's Odysseus is a dinosaur in disguise, most would view this interpretation as a radically creative act on the part of a reader – ultimately as 'incorrect' and unsanctioned by the text. This is not to say either that one fixed meaning delivered from an author on high is valued either; plenty of readers, as with J.K Rowling's statement that her character Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* series is gay,⁶⁵ may feel free to value the 'text itself' more highly than author-mandated judgement. For such readers, the 'text itself' functions as an authority outside of the author's control but as an authority the reader may feel is outside of his or her control also.

⁶⁴ Barthes, p. 147.

⁶⁵ 'JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay', *BBC News*, 20 October 2007 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7053982.stm>> [accessed 1 September 2015]. This particular instance of authorial-readership disagreement in relation to the *Harry Potter* series is potentially indicative of prejudice against homosexuality in addition to issues of interpretation; however, the role of extra-textual intrusion by the author is still revelatory as to how hatred and ignorance can be unconsciously incorporated into a reader's recreation of a narrative (see Chapter Four for more on what I term 'reader causality' in this regard)

The notion of inferring authority can be seen as operating with powerful effect in various texts, most notably in the powerful reframing device of the ‘twist’. In such cases narrative details are omitted in negative space with identification and interpretation occurring around this, only for the resulting characters formed in reader’s minds to be ‘contradicted’ by later revelation -- for example, that the welcoming Lord Bertilak is *really* the sinister Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (14th cent.) or that Bruce Willis’s character Malcolm Crowe has been dead all along in *The Sixth Sense* (1999).⁶⁶ These are all revelations rather than contradictions of prior narrative material – we are never told that Crowe *is* alive in *The Sixth Sense*, for example; the majority of viewers are just likely to assume he is. The same principle operates in less extreme examples of revelation such as discovering the occupation of a character or some hitherto unknown and surprising aspect of their belief system or ethics which might alter the reader’s working model of that character moving forward and looking backwards. Twists or plot events that heavily contradict the themes, tone, or integral parts of the belief system generated by such readings are often rejected, leading readers to declare certain actions ‘unbelievable’ or ‘implausible’ for a certain character to be involved in – for example, claiming that Bruce Wayne, whose parents were killed by a gunman, ‘wouldn’t’ use a gun despite narrative depiction of him doing so.⁶⁷ Such claims indicate a higher-level character formed within the reader’s mind that is, beyond a certain point, no longer beholden to the inferred authority of a text – a character that has gained, or exceeded, that same authoritative status. This claim is supported by the fact that characters that appear in multiple works by multiple authors are often the ones to gain this greater status, not as subject to a single textual authority due to their expansion beyond a single text or single author (traditionally perceived to hold such authority).

This situation of the author, the ‘text itself’, and narrators in competition for the reader’s trust is illustrated vividly by the critical response to Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire* and the potential ‘twists’ of this text. The novel consists of a poem by a deceased fictional writer named John Shade and a commentary on that poem by a fictional editor named Charles Kinbote, representing a parody in part of academic tendencies through the poor criticism Kinbote engages in and his self-aggrandizing explication of his own life instead of Shade’s. The novel eventually suggests that Kinbote may have been deceiving the reader as to the diegetic status of events all along, with various characters potentially fictional within the diegesis itself. In order to decipher what is actually happening, trust is required or broken in the authority of various narrators found throughout the text. In this manner, there are three authorities likely to be

⁶⁶ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J.R.R. Tolkien, E.V. Gordon, and Norman Davis, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); *The Sixth Sense*, dir. by M. Night Shyamalan (Buena Vista, 1999).

⁶⁷ ‘Isn’t Batman Against Using Guns?’, *Giant Bomb Forums* <<http://www.giantbomb.com/batman-arkham-knight/3030-45577/forums/isnt-batman-against-using-guns-1486683/>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

inferred in *Pale Fire* – the name on the cover of the text, ‘Vladimir Nabokov’; the name signed to the poem ‘Pale Fire’, ‘John Shade’; and the name signed to the commentary to this poem, ‘Charles Kinbote’. The concept of inferred authority (as I have termed the reader’s belief in certain sanctioned ways of responding to a text) does not have to be located within a singular monolithic entity within a text and can indeed sometimes still be located in pre-existing narrative concepts such as a sense of authorial presence, a fictional character, focalisation, style, and so on. In novels such as *Pale Fire*, the presence of various found documents create a doubling of inferred authority insomuch as readers might not only conceive of what the ‘text as a whole’ or Nabokov intends for their response, but what the fictional authors Shade and Kinbote intend for their texts on a different diegetic level.

Nabokov is a textual ghost between the cracks in these texts, standing behind both Shade and Kinbote so that readers might, for example, infer that when Kinbote suggests readers buy multiple copies of the book and/or cut them up to place each page side by side,⁶⁸ such readers are not ‘really’ supposed to do this, that this goes beyond the amount of effort and cost we are normally expected to go through in reading texts. Yet if this instruction is humorous and not ‘meant’ to be followed (and there is no absolute reason why this instruction could not be inferred to be serious), there is no clear replacement instruction as to how to move between poem and commentary, whether the reader is supposed to weave between each or read one before the other or, indeed, to follow various redirections to ‘see’ various notes in between. Unless recommended a path of action by an outside source or critic of the text, the way the reader moves through this text emerges from what that reader *thinks* the text is asking him or her to do – what the reader thinks it means to read a poem and a commentary, albeit a commentary with equal (fictional) importance to that poem. For example, as I explore in Chapter Three of this thesis, players controlling a hero rescuing a young woman in the video game *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) and viewers watching another hero travelling with a young woman in the film *Oldboy* (2003) may make certain assumptions as to the romantic potential for such situations due to prior genre experiences, only to have these assumptions manipulated through the revelation that both pairs represent unwitting father and daughter relationships. Likewise, the sequences of *Pale Fire* work to play upon genre expectations; an academic used to reading poems and their commentaries might read *Pale Fire* in a far different way to someone who assumes such commentaries are subordinate and uninteresting ‘extras’, or indeed someone far more interested in prose novels than in poetry. The inferred authority of the cumulative ‘text as a whole’ emerges here out of the kinds of authority the reader has encountered and sustained in past readings of other texts.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 25. All further references to this edition will be given in the text.

As soon as the opening material mentioning 'Nabokov' is left behind (cover-xxii), the remainder of the text is (fictionally) a found document with documentary status. This found document version of *Pale Fire* is presented as having been edited by the character Kinbote with an additional commentary and a bizarre index to the events in both so that a (fictional) reader might receive the entire text as Kinbote has arranged it. As already suggested, Kinbote is no mere narrator, therefore, but a kind of inferred authority in his own right, as (fictionally) he can be inferred to have 'created' the arrangement of the text.⁶⁹ This inference is further problematized by the quickly undermined notion that Kinbote is delivering a documentary of Shade's final days, delivering this authority a similar status to Johnson's in *The Unfortunates*, as a consciousness attempting to present the 'real' without being able to properly perceive it. Rather than existential solipsism, however, Kinbote suffers from selfishness and, quite possibly, partial or total insanity, with various statements in his own text suggesting that his world-view is not authenticated by the events or direct speech he includes. Shade does not seem to act like the 'friend' Kinbote's narrative voice characterizes him to be, with repeated diegetic actions suggesting Kinbote is unwelcome in Shade's home (p. 75).

Indeed, Kinbote begins discussing the importance of the last King of Zembla to Shade's poem, which becomes (or already seems, depending on the order of reading) improbable when the reader attempts to relate the commentary to a poem which seems to have nothing to do with either the King or Kinbote. Eventually, in a twist (or very early on, if redirections to 'see' various notes have been followed)⁷⁰ the reader sees a switch to the first-person to discuss the King and Kinbote as one being (p. 194); this switch demonstrates that Kinbote *is* in fact this King and has been talking about himself as 'King' in the third person (or will go on to talk about himself in the third-person) throughout the text (pp. 62-63, *passim*). Two versions of the character in the reader's mind are therefore either smashed together retrospectively to become one character or the reader unites these hitherto distinct characters as they are encountered in future instances. There is also a third possibility where the reader has already been led to guess this 'extraordinary secret' through Kinbote's improbable knowledge of secrets relating to the king's life and interiority unavailable to all others (p. 171). In many of these cases, the reader's ongoing inference of the 'text as a whole' and its inferred authority – the way the reader thinks he or she is supposed to move through the text – leads to very different sequences of character formation and therefore very different potential inferences regarding various characterizing details.

⁶⁹ See prop theory for more on this (fictional) caveat in Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of the Representational Arts* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 35-43, *passim*.

⁷⁰ In the eighth note of the text (to lines 47-48, p. 68), the reader is directed to see the note to line 691 (p. 194).

These multiple sequences become significant in the commentary's conclusion which acts as the terminal point of many different sequences, whether the sequence involves redirections, interweaving between both texts, or reading the poem first and then the commentary. At the end of the final note, Kinbote destroys any tenable surety as to his identity, narration, and even the notion that he is mad by admitting that the country of Zembla may not exist (as it does not in 'real life') (p. 236). 'Kinbote' reveals that he might lying, diabolic, or a metafictional creation of Nabokov himself in a final triumph of the hidden spectre behind the text – that the twist of the novel might be that it was all just written by a 'Russian writer in exile', Nabokov himself. The reader already knew this but for his or her suspension of disbelief and the lack of constant reminder that the fictional characters he or she reconstructed were not 'real' and did not *need* to have the unity of meaning the reader might have granted them. The text can be inferred to express the meaning that it does not have ultimate meaning. In *The Unfortunates*, the inferred authority of Johnson's prose could not fully interpret the world, but his sincerity in this inability to interpret was never in question; here, we cannot *trust* Kinbote. In a 1967 interview, Nabokov named Kinbote's final gesture in the text as suicide, an apt description of what happens here.⁷¹ The inferred authority loses his authority, his very nature, through his own utterances, just as the character formed in the reader's mind is blown apart in a loose collection of utterances and values, losing its mimetic and synthetic cohesion.

Pale Fire's reception history demonstrates an interesting tendency in response at this point in the text, where in discovering Kinbote's unreality and this lack of ultimate meaning, many readers' first impulse is to force meaning back upon the text and to select one of the possibilities posited as to Kinbote's 'real' identity rather than suspending judgement. Brian Boyd, for example, claims that the 'true' meaning of the text is that Hazel – the poet Shade's daughter who commits suicide prior to the time-frame in which Kinbote is allegedly writing (line 500, p. 43) – has become a ghost and subliminally inspired both Kinbote's Zemblan fantasy and John Shade's poem in the form of a butterfly, and that *Pale Fire*'s ultimate theme is the afterlife.⁷² Eric Naiman notes in his review of Boyd's analysis, however, that he disagrees with Boyd's conclusion even as he finds further evidence for its justification within the text.⁷³ Indeed, even here, quoting Hazel's surname, 'Shade', emphasises her ghostlike potential in this reading.

⁷¹ Vladimir Nabokov and Alfred Appel Jr., 'An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 8 (1967), 127-52 (p. 137).

⁷² Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, 1999), p. 173, 242, *passim*.

⁷³ Eric Naiman, 'Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery by Brian Boyd', *Slavic Review*, 60 (2001), 458-59, p. 458.

It is important to note that Boyd is not right or wrong in his construction of the text, whatever claims are made regarding his providing a 'key' for the text's secret truths; his construction makes it true for him, and those who arrive at similar positions, as texts necessitate nothing in terms of construction but merely suggest certain authoritative patterns to readers who are looking for certain things. Indeed, Boyd here assumes that all sequences through the text should be subsumed within a supposedly superior master-sequence taking all into account, leading Boyd to form a stronger surety as to there being an 'ultimate meaning' rather than abandon the text to uncertainty.⁷⁴ Boyd presents a fascinatingly elaborate ideal reading method for the text where he would have readers re-enact their reading several times in a row, each time better able to fit disparate details into their staging of Kinbote as each reader proceeds with the end-knowledge of Kinbote's collapse (therefore no longer a shock, but a foundation for the continuing formation of the character in the reader's mind). The reader proceeds, in this hypothetical path, with the assumption that all these disparate details can not only be *made* to cohere within a stable version of Kinbote, but that they *should* be subsumed within a whole unified being. However, ultimate meaning here is undecidable in the sense that nothing necessitates or makes one reading of sequence 'superior' to any other; this does not necessarily even mean that we should leave the text as 'undecidable', as this is just the same as choosing any other interpretation, even if it seems to make sense for a text divested of inferred authority, of cohesive and authenticating structures in its final moments.

Just as the Boyd version of *Pale Fire* has its own textual evidence, so too does this 'suspended judgement' version of the text have its own supporting moments and even – somewhat surprisingly for a fictional construct which destroys any stable notion of its make-believe existence – its own emotional potential. As mentioned earlier, throughout the text Kinbote uses the third-person to refer to a King we may or may not believe to be synonymous with himself. If it is a delusion, the wish to be the King of Zembla appears as a grandiose and egotistical escape into a land where everyone loves him but for his Marxist oppressors, a land of 'mirrors' that reflects Kinbote's own distorted views of his present and predominantly hostile town of New Wye. However, in one passage late in the text, Kinbote's distancing from his own apparent experiences allows him to analyse his own behaviour in a poignant manner simply not viable in his everyday existence, inviting the reader to potentially assume a greater degree of sincerity on Kinbote's part in contrast to the humorous selfishness he demonstrates elsewhere.

Kinbote claims that his King-self 'was, had always been, casual and heartless. But the heart of his dreaming self, both before and after the rupture, made extraordinary amends' (p.166). Hitherto encountered as selfish, cloying, paedophilic, and dismissive of his wife, Kinbote

⁷⁴ Boyd, p. 13. For Boyd's fear of 'undecidability', see pp. 3-4.

nevertheless demonstrates unusual mature sympathy for his King-self with his claim that he loved his wife Disa within his dreams: if the reader sees Kinbote as capable of such high emotion, this would indeed make ‘extraordinary amends’. Dreaming is posited as a method of sobbing ‘away the monstrous past’ (p. 167), aligned to the alternative escapes of Kinbote’s ‘brilliant invention’ of Zembla and his possible suicide (p. 188). Kinbote’s dream-love, however, possesses a superior claim to those of any objective reality, exceeding ‘in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface existence’ (p. 167). The earlier distinction between characters as synthetic and as mimetic of particularised human beings is functionally irrelevant in this case, as difference is suspended in favour of an appeal to powerful affective response, ‘exceed[ing] in emotional tone’ all else – we are given access to an inner self that Kinbote cannot even fully admit he has, charging the reader with absorbing this new characterisation into his or her identification going forward. This unification by the reader of Kinbote’s subject matter with Kinbote’s own emotions occurs even though the reader ‘knows’ that he or she is not ‘supposed’ to know he is talking about himself as the King, making the gesture on Kinbote’s part even more sincere, showing multiple levels of inferred authority operating in symphony.

After this passage, Shade (to whom Kinbote has been recounting these thoughts) questions whether the King’s love for Disa is indeed true and how Kinbote can know it is true, two questions that encapsulate the epistemological demand of *Pale Fire* as explored by many of the novel’s critics. Kinbote replies:

Do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff *will* be true, and the people *will* come alive. A poet’s purified truth can cause no pain, no offense. True art is above false honor (p. 170).

Kinbote is claiming that the truths of a story or a dream may not be empirically valid but possess a status superior to rational objections, which become trifles in the face of this new realism based upon the hyper-realistic affective tethers of ‘true art’. Indeed, the text thematises the way plot no longer matters here – ‘the gist, rather than the actual plot of the dream’ (p. 167) – recalling Shade’s comment that ‘not text but texture’ is the key to understanding life (l. 808). The entire dream is encapsulated by the coincidence between Shade’s textual portrait of his wife Sybil and Kinbote’s ‘memory’ of Disa, a ‘plain unretouched likeness’ (p. 164). The ability of a reader to understand this note is extended not merely to the reader’s ability to appreciate *any* fiction, but to the existence of ‘sense’ and meaning in ‘anything at all’:

I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all (p. 164-5).

Kinbote has issued a challenge to the reader to appreciate this strangeness *as* strangeness, not attempting to resolve it as something else and remove its dream-like power. The issue is universalised to establish the 'sense' in both literature and larger reality.

Nevertheless, at the moment Kinbote considers the possibility that this dream-love for Disa might just be a 'glimmer', it disappears into mutually exclusive realities placed in a deceptive progression reminiscent of the novel's conclusion with Disa 'no longer there' (p. 168). The crumbling of Kinbote's dream-love is *Pale Fire* in miniature, with the 'notes' that are passed to him detailing abrupt ontological shifts: this configuration begins with Disa 'inaugurating a fire' reminiscent of the novel's title, moving onto an odd conception that Disa 'had married an American businessman', that Disa 'had become a character in a novel', and at that moment of admitting fictionality, that Disa is 'dead' (p. 168). The dream is not sustainable, despite the supposed superior claims of art's truth.

Pale Fire may be inferred, in part, to enact a tragedy of metafiction, with Kinbote's multiple existences all finally untenable (regardless of which one is 'true') resulting in his (and the text's) suicide. Nabokov wrote that the 'closest we can get to a definition of art' is the formula of 'beauty plus pity', that 'where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual'.⁷⁵ Significantly, Nabokov stands as one of the critics of theories of narrative empathy with particular characters mentioned in this thesis's introduction; Nabokov claimed that we should not read 'for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters' of a novel, to share 'the emotions of the people in the book', but that we should instead read to share 'the emotions of its author – the joys and difficulty of creation'.⁷⁶ However, contrary to the author's own theory, in *Pale Fire*, this distinction between identification with characters and the 'joys and difficulty of creation' is somewhat blurred: we are presented with a fictional author talking about the creations of his own potential fictions. Not only this, but we see the death of both these joys and their beauty; the various narrative worlds created throughout the text do indeed die with the individual who appeared to have partially inspired them. Shade created the poem 'Pale Fire' and claimed that the 'password' to life is 'pity' only to be gunned down by the pitiless Gradus, his assassin (p. 179).

It is in the figure of Gradus that much of this identification and inferred authority of characterisation in this novel is established, in a similar exclusionary manner to the way in

⁷⁵ *Lectures on Literature*, p. 251.

⁷⁶ *Lectures on Literature*, pp. 381-82.

which Wendy was treated within the novel *The Unfortunates*. The reader of *Pale Fire* may be led to feel disgust towards Gradus. In *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Sianne Ngai characterizes disgust as the opposite of both Kantian beauty and the emotion of pity.⁷⁷ Throughout *Pale Fire*, Kinbote fixates upon Gradus in this manner. Kinbote reminds us that he has ‘staggered’ Gradus’s characterizing details throughout the novel so that the first is ‘the vaguest while those that will follow become gradually clearer as gradual Gradus approaches in space and time’ (p.123), culminating in the final word of the entire commentary with a description that echoes the syntax of Disa’s dream-world collapse:

Somebody has already set out, somebody still rather far away is buying a ticket, is boarding a bus, a ship, a plane, has landed, is walking towards a million photographers, and presently he will ring at my door – a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus (p. 236)

The end of the text does indeed present a more ‘competent’ Gradus inasmuch as the assassin has killed the King; indeed, Kinbote has killed himself by destroying any surety as to his own stable existence. However, this metafictional suicide seems cruel and callous as Kinbote has become this aforementioned character type who works against the reader’s emotional investment in the narrative as opposed to what might be seen to be a more sympathetic portrayal in Kinbote’s inability to sustain his dream-love for his wife Disa. Patricia Waugh briefly addresses *Pale Fire* in her work *Metafiction* (1984), claiming that ‘the possibility soon emerges that Kinbote’s ‘pursuer’ may be his mad self whose projections are both the basis of, and inimical to, artistic invention, and which therefore destroy the poetic Shade’.⁷⁸ The narrative of *Pale Fire* establishes this ‘inimical’ relation to artistic relation through its repeated probing of the external gestures and visible signs of Gradus’s character, revealing his interiority to be ill-defined and barely existent; unlike the dream worlds and desires of other characters, Gradus has only ‘general ideas’ (p. 123).

Kinbote implicates the reader in this ‘gradual’ elaboration of Gradus’s character earlier in the narrative, with the dual ‘we’ alternating from past characterisation to the present moment:

We know already some of his gestures, we know the chimpanzee slouch of his broad body and short hindlegs. We have heard enough about his creased suit. We can at last describe his tie, an Easter gift from a dressy butcher, his brother-in-law in Onhava. (p. 218)

Do we know these things, however? The reader has heard Gradus described mostly in allegorical terms up to this point, as a man of ‘general’ ideas suspicious of all those he perceives

⁷⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 334-35.

⁷⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: 1984, repr. 2003), p. 85.

to be above him. Asserting that ‘we know’ these things equalizes these more mental aspects of Gradus’s character with physical, animalized features, a chimera of primate – ‘chimpanzee’ – and an anonymous other animal with ‘hindlegs’. In a similar manner to how readers have to temporarily accept the authority of *The Unfortunates*’ depiction of women in order to understand that novel’s narrative, ‘We know’ here has ontological force inasmuch as it grants us this knowledge of Gradus at the same time we are told we already have it. Shifting onto ‘creased suit’ at this point seems to elide anatomy with clothing, giving a sense almost of creased skin, of someone whose appearance is not quite right. Even his ‘tie’, ‘at last’ described by the dual ‘we’ as if it were the climax of the story reserved for this moment, is from a ‘dressy butcher’. This ‘dressy butcher’ is in turn a pun referring both to a potential assassin like Gradus and a meat vendor, fitting in with the concentration on physical features of the body in the previous few sentences and in the rest of the passage that follows. Indeed, this emphasis upon the reader’s tactile engagement with Gradus’s character develops towards a metaphysical depiction of both Kinbote and reader passing through Gradus’s body: ‘phantom-like, we pass through him [...] his magenta and mulberry insides’ (p.2 18), likely evoking a sense of disgust at bodily and food-based entanglement.

Why might undulating in a man’s entrails disgust us? It does not necessarily have to do so – we can conceive of a real reader for whom this back and forth movement through a body associated with various animals, with a ‘creased’ and synthetic texture, and edible meat and fruit might be fine, even pleasurable. Indeed, even in disgusted responses there might be some element of pleasure -- Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1980) uses an example of food as abject, as desired but rejected.⁷⁹ In order to understand the nature of these ‘mulberry insides’ into which we are invited to ‘undulate’, we have to characterize this form briefly as food even if we resolve it to metaphorical status and thereby engage in a kind of cannibalistic taboo. Entrails summon a sense of mortality, invoking the human being as an animal body within which we might die. It invites a blurring between a person’s mind and a body, something which may repel many. We can however imagine many of those less likely to be disgusted by entrails – a butcher, for example – as dealing with such body parts as their trade demands on a regular basis, considering them more as objects to be utilised than as this abject space we are aware to be a part of us but which many are not quite willing to accept as *equalling* their subjecthood. It is not that readers do not empathise with and attempt to construct abjected characters – they must logically do so in order to read a text – but such processes can involve a simultaneous expulsion of the taboo and disgusting object, as I explore in relation to the incest taboo’s operation in *Bioshock Infinite* and *Oldboy* in Chapter Three of this thesis.

⁷⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2-3, 75-76, 115-16.

Kinbote goes on to further insist upon Gradus's abject nature:

Spiritually [Gradus] did not exist. Morally he was a dummy pursuing another dummy. The fact that his weapon was a real one, and his quarry a highly developed human being, this fact belonged to *our* world of events; in his, it had no meaning. (p. 218)

The reader is led to feel disgust towards a despiritualised character with 'dummy' morals as opposed to the united perception of 'our world of events', Kinbote and the reader's. Of course, considering the ending of this novel will reveal explicitly metafictional possibilities for these characters – 'figments' in a 'stage play' (p. 236) – these statements also have literal value. Spiritually, Gradus does not exist at all. He is a dummy, a character, a mannequin, albeit an inferior character to one who is 'highly developed' and who has accrued a greater sense of spiritual reality, albeit in mock. We are told, in a nice echo of a 'highly developed human being' as Gradus's hunted 'quarry', that no 'motive hunting or rational inquiry' can explain Gradus's attempt to murder (p. 219), ironically for those critics who have tried to do so, and Kinbote concludes that:

If his human incompleteness be deemed insufficient to explain his idiotic journey across the Atlantic just to empty the magazine of his gun, we may concede, doctor, that our half-man was also half-mad. (p. 219)

And in one version of events revealed just before the man's suicide later in the novel, Gradus is indeed mad, not intending to kill Shade or Kinbote at all but is instead an escaped mental patient whom the equally mad Kinbote elevates to the status of Marxist assassin. At this moment of possible revelation we are told he died not as 'a feeble splutter of the clockwork' but in a 'gesture of humanoid despair', something resembling a human, something still slight and an object of partial disgust – a 'gesture' like those we have come to associate with Gradus, replacing a 'splutter' suggesting liquid movement. Here, Gradus is no longer purely abject and inhuman; he did not die 'because having played his part in the story he saw no point in existing any longer' but out of some human feeling (p. 235). Kinbote uses theatrical language at this point to dismiss Gradus and maintain his authority as possible director of events, proclaiming 'Enough of this. Exit Jack Grey' (p. 235).

This dismissal of Gradus occurs just before the reader's apparent identification of Kinbote with the King of Zembla (if indeed the reader has made and still retains this identification of synonymy) falls apart in a multitude of unstable possibilities as to 'what happened'. It is significant therefore that Kinbote forcibly attempts to distinguish both himself and the reader from Gradus throughout the novel in this 'we', as in the 'undulating his entrails' passage; the reader and Kinbote are united against Gradus even as we 'pass through him' and are invited to

examine Gradus's interiority like no other character in the novel. Ngai writes that even as the disgusting seems to impose itself as 'something to be mingled with and perhaps even enjoyed', yet potentially 'contaminating', it 'strengthens and polices this boundary' between subject and object in a 'fairly definite response' preventing sympathetic response whilst creating a kind of sympathy between those disgusted by the object.⁸⁰ Indeed, Ngai claims that disgust 'expects concurrence',⁸¹ often uniting several subjects to repel the disgusting object together.

Just before Gradus shoots Shade, Kinbote posits a thought experiment to the reader reminiscent of Nabokov's own views on art and the interpretation of fiction, asking 'What if we awoke one day, all of us, and found ourselves utterly unable to read? I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable' (p. 227). He implores the reader to appreciate what is happening when they read characters with full knowledge of this 'miracle', suggesting that:

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. (p. 227)

This idea of the 'gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction' recalls Gradus, who upon his first appearance in the text is linked in a footnote to the word 'gradual'; indeed, 'Browning' is the model of gun with which Gradus will shoot John Shade a few pages later whilst 'caveman' recalls not only Gradus's savagery but his sense of grotesqueness -- 'grotto', hollow, cave -- as opposed to the 'highly developed' alternative, the 'miracle' of these semiotic signs containing these 'live people, speaking, weeping, laughing', a tricolon that may highlight a spectrum of affective response with neutral, tragic, and comic emotions, but which has a sense of simplification in comparison to Nabokov's usually virtuoso wordplay, a sense of routine characterisation in itself. We must not mistake this paragraph for a suggestion that we should accept these as 'live people' directly, as this would be the same error those who are 'absurdly accustomed' to characterisation might make. Instead, we are being asked to respond to them as real people whilst maintaining overall awareness of what fiction is, its status as 'text and texture'. The state of the 'treeman' and the 'caveman', individuals without developed culture, is the state to which one returns when this miracle is not understood as such and/or when the author has not developed the character as such.

⁸⁰ Ngai, p. 335.

⁸¹ Ngai, p. 337.

Gradus cannot feel pity but paradoxically we cannot feel pity for him, for there is nothing there until the final glimmer of his ‘gesture of humanoid despair’ (p. 235). Creative, mad Kinbote seems to represent an alternative to men such as the gradual and half-mad Gradus; at least, Kinbote seems to represent such an alternative before Kinbote himself, in his ‘suicidal’ Gradusian manoeuvre, reveals his lies and destroys any possible reality until there are only mutually exclusive delusions and half-truths. As in *The Unfortunates*, we are tricked by our own inference of authority, a possibility that seems to be confirmed and made overt in the text’s conclusion. We are tricked by means of encountering a ridiculous reader of brute acceptance and anti-spirituality, into wanting to believe in the existence and highly-developed, beautiful, pitiful nature of other characters, only to be shown our arbitrary acceptance of all of these approaches – that art is itself arbitrary, that the ‘beauty’ of the narrative must die with its ending, and to show us what is lost without hope of recovery. Moreover, we are tricked specifically through use of a *target*, by insisting that we judge other people such as the ‘half-man’ Gradus.

Nabokov wrote that a ‘sophisticated’ solver of a certain kind of chess problem would ‘start by falling for an illusory pattern’: what he calls an ‘antithetic’ inferno.⁸² The player then becomes an ‘ultrasophisticated solver’ in arriving at what an ‘unsophisticated’ player would have found simple. This is likened to the way ‘somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores.’ In this sense, in trying to understand and sympathise with Gradus, we become temporarily unsophisticated in encountering the unsophisticated, rising above it to the preferable illusion, only to realize what the ‘unsophisticated’, ‘brute’ reader might have known all along. Nabokov claimed that identification with characters is indicative of the ‘worst’ impulse of a reader -- here, we are invited to identify only for the results of this impulse to be destroyed in relation to Kinbote.

And, as with *The Unfortunates*, the only character who fully survives this process is the inferred authority of Nabokov himself – yet unlike *The Unfortunates*, where readers are unlikely to fully develop individuals other than Johnson, this text’s distortion of stable identification with any of its characters has tragic implications in that Kinbote *was* potentially developed only for our stable assumption of unity in our understanding of his character to be taken away from us. Kinbote’s downfall occurred due to the flaw of his illusory nature, that we suspended our disbelief, an unavoidable reminder in the process of accepting these details temporarily as ‘real’ that these details are not in fact real, of a ‘brilliant invention’, of a Zembla.

⁸² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 291.

As highlighted in this chapter's introduction, and as has defined many discussions relating to reader construction of character, the fictional nature of characters leads readers to respond in a manner different to that which they might in real-life social interactions. As I have demonstrated in my arguments regarding *The Unfortunates* and *Pale Fire*, the ontologically synthetic reality of characters is often overlooked when it is their unreal fictional nature and construction by the reader that leads to the greatest potential for an ethics of narrative empathy. Richard Walsh's argument that readers feel emotion for the values and phrases associated with a character is useful here in relation to *Pale Fire*. Walsh hypothesises readers have emotional responses to characters due to their values rather than mimetic concerns, and here we have a character without mimetic unity. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, one of Walsh's arguments relates to popular affective response to non-mimetic characterisations, such as in Walsh's example of the sentimental outcry over Little Nell's death in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In this model, readers may form emotional responses to each element of the web of values relating to innocence, grieving, and contemporary sentimentality that forms under the cohesive unity of Little Nell. The reader's feeling that he or she may feel emotion for an individual rather than in response to values associated within an individual emerges as a by-product of interpretation, not as the beginning of the interpretive chain. However, as I contended in my thesis's introduction, the reader's belief that they are responding to individuals is not so easily discarded. Considering the partial similarity of Walsh's arguments with Nabokov's own statements on characterisation and the reading process in *Pale Fire* and in his lectures as discussed throughout this chapter, Walsh's theory is quite significant here as a point of connection between Nabokov's ideas and my own. We could argue that this tendency of readers can be used to account for the ability of fictional arguments to achieve reader agreement and investment to a greater degree than factual arguments. Even if we do differentiate between what is actually happening in our experiences with narrative and what readers *think* happens as the *product* of narrative experiences, the fact that readers think certain things occur in the narrative experience can still be indicative of important parts of fictional stories' effects.

If we assume that most readers believe in the authority of a text's sequence in addition to this belief in a unity of character – that, for example, in many western prose novels one must begin on page 1 and read from left to right on each new line until the last page of the text – then that sequence can be assumed to have an impact on the idea of the character created in the reader's mind throughout the reading process, but so too can sequence be assumed to have an impact upon the reader's guesswork. To return once more to Iser, 'the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications.'⁸³ Here, the inferred authority of a text's sequence – combined with the material facticity of that text – imposes 'limits' upon the reader's guesswork,

⁸³ Iser, p. 276.

however permeable or likely to collapse such limits might be. Again, radical scepticism as to the potential for various readings to ‘cohere’ is unhelpful here; in so-and-so edition of a text, regardless of the individual copy, x word comes after y word, and ‘x’ and ‘y’ most probably have a roughly agreed upon meaning in the interpretive community, regardless of individual variation upon that meaning. The variant sequences of *Composition No 1*, *The Unfortunates*, and *Pale Fire* have all demonstrated the ways in which sequence cannot be understood as arbitrary, whether on the macro-level of events or micro-level of word choice and style. However, what *Pale Fire* demonstrates more than these other texts is an emotional investment and the trust placed in such sequential authorities, and the sense of betrayal that might emerge once such trust is broken – the fear that a narrative might have just been all a dream, that those you have constructed are what you knew they always were, fiction.

Another suggestion that emerges from this chapter’s discussion of *The Unfortunates* and *Pale Fire* is the idea that following a particular narrator’s sense of his or her world could lead to the temporary adoption of values and ethics that might be contrary to the reader’s own. In this regard, what is most paradoxical, ethically speaking, is the sense of betrayal that emerges from the ‘lies’ of sequential authorities that create twists in which we were never lied to at all, when readers just assumed a state of affairs. Readers might feel so strongly in their responses to such deception because they themselves are responsible for generating much of the authority they feel they have been following throughout novels, and have deceived themselves using the patterns of the text. It is not so simple to say that the inferred authority of the text is something the reader temporarily adopts, as with Johnson’s potential misogyny in *The Unfortunates* or Kinbote’s worldview where he is king and Gradus is an assassin. Instead, it must be emphasised that the reader has enacted, generated, and given life to this sense of authority via their attempt to understand the text, via what he or she might believe to be compliance. The reader is his or her own victim as a result, with important implications for ethical situations facing readers of literature who do not necessarily always encounter twists but who always face the implicit decision of whether to obey inferred power structures in texts.

4. The Ethics of the Fictional in *Hopscotch*

My analysis of *Composition No 1*, *The Unfortunates*, and *Pale Fire* has gestured towards the importance of the contingency of sequence upon the eventual characters formed in readers’ minds as they move through texts; I have used this contingency in part to mount an argument as

to the ontological nature of such characters as fictional and synthetic, lacking all coherency and reality apart from that unity which the reader grants them. As explored by Richard Walsh's theory of fictionality, readers may feel great emotion in response to texts due to the web of values, emotions, and ideas encountered, with the impression that they are responding to people when really this unity is an illusion that emerges out of the reading process. This thesis has argued, however, that this sense of unity and character reality is still an important part of reader construction of character, especially considering the way in which readers grant a sense of authority outside of themselves to texts, an authority which ironically emerges from the reader's own inferences rather than anything demanded by the original text. As theorists such as Walsh and Keen have shown, readers do not necessarily require fictional people to be entirely like real-life humans, but regardless we could say that fictional characters are often treated by readers as if they were ethical agents capable of decision-making and possessing a personality. Readers can therefore be said to respond to fictions ontologically dissimilar to 'real life' humans, but still to respond to such fictions *as if they are* real in part. The ethics of this negotiation – the simultaneous reality and unreality of fictional characters in different senses – is rarely explored in its full implications. Few theorists account for the ethics of the specifically fictional situation, instead considering that this fictionality renders the situation at least partially outside of ethics as in Keen's arguments or that fictionality allows the reader to be 'trained' in a safe space separate from real ethical importance, as in Zunshine's work.⁸⁴

There is a similar tradition in video games studies of viewing the player's activity as occurring in what Johan Huizinga termed the 'magic circle', a protected area for play separated from real-world activity.⁸⁵ In his 'Freud Lives' argument, Slavoj Žižek considers this protected space free of real-world consequences not just in terms of play, but of how we might view player behaviour in partially narrative-driven games where our real-world ethics might stand revealed:

In our 'society of the spectacle', in which what we experience as everyday reality more and more takes the form of the lie made real, Freud's insights show their true value. Consider the interactive computer games some of us play compulsively, games which enable a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It's all too easy to assume that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace in order to escape from a dull, impotent reality. But perhaps the games are more telling than that. What if, in playing them, I articulate the perverse core of my personality which, because of ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in real life? Isn't my virtual persona in a way 'more real than reality'? Isn't it precisely because I am aware that this is 'just a game' that in it I can do what I would never be able to in the real world? In this precise sense, as Lacan put it, the Truth has

⁸⁴ Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 162, *passim*.

⁸⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 9-10.

the structure of a fiction: what appears in the guise of dreaming, or even daydreaming, is sometimes the truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded. Therein resides the ultimate lesson of *The Interpretation of Dreams*: reality is for those who cannot sustain the dream.⁸⁶

Much of Žižek's argument here relates to the specifically immersive nature of a video game, in which the player can control the fictional character (or 'avatar') and act through him or her. This thesis will, throughout later chapters, return to this ethical interpretation of the video game player and the specific affordances that video games allow in contrast to prose novels in order to mount larger arguments about the nature of reader construction of fictional characters and narrative empathy, particularly with regards to Žižek's gender assumptions. However, for now, this chapter will restrict itself to interpreting the relevance of Žižek's argument in analogous relation to prose-based fictional characters in order to lay the groundwork for later arguments in this thesis. As I have demonstrated thus far, readers are highly complicit in and responsible for much of their own responses to novels and fictional characters; even if those own responses may not be radically different from the responses of other readers, inferring authority from a given sequence still involves reader guesswork and compliance with something that is not really 'real' beyond the power it is given by that reader. To rephrase a question asked several times throughout this thesis, if Keen suggests that we do not necessarily become altruistic in the real world after reading fiction due to its fictionality, then could readers actively respond in ethically problematic ways within that fictional construction due to the lack of real world consequences for their actions? Could novels be seen as acting like games to provide an outlet for desires that cannot be enacted without censure in 'real world' social systems or which the reader might be curious about attempting, allowing the 'trying out' a theory of mind in a similar manner to that which Zunshine describes?

Another way of looking at this question is through Jean Paul Sartre's concept of the 'look' and the importance of inference in interpersonal relationships. In his play *No Exit* (1944), Sartre writes 'L'enfer, c'est les autres', translated variously as the famous 'Hell is other people', 'Hell is just — other people', and 'Hell is the Other', suggesting in the preface to the text that:

[...] other people are basically the most important means we have in ourselves for our own knowledge of ourselves. When we think about ourselves, when we try to know ourselves, basically we use the knowledge of us which other people already have. We judge ourselves with the means other people have and have given us for judging ourselves. Into whatever I say about myself someone else's judgement always enters. Into whatever I feel within myself someone else's judgement enters.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Slavoj Žižek, 'Freud Lives!', *London Review of Books*, 28.10 (2006), 32 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n10/slavoj-zizek/freud-lives>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

⁸⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Theater*, ed. by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. by Frank Jellinek (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 199.

Sartre's formulation shows how humans exist in a social world and how human identities are negotiated on an ongoing basis in response not only to the gaze of others but more importantly in response to *what one thinks others think*. Sartre's theory provides a philosophical support for my concept of inferred authority when applied to fictional others. Even if human identity is incoherent as deconstructionists have suggested, formed from within and without through innumerable contexts, the primacy of personal subjectivity in this process — the role of *inference* — cannot be underplayed. For reader response to fictional characters, Sartre's 'look' might be seen as operating in a particularly vivid manner. Readers encounter a stream of other people, in part reflecting on themselves and their own potential object status in response to the presence of these other people whilst realising the subjectivity of these other lives, much like real interpersonal relation.

The difference here between Sartre's ideas as to interpersonal relation and how we identify with fictional characters is that in the fictional encounter the subjectivity of these 'others' is already defined and infected by their construction via the reading process. Characters are already ontologically staged through the reader's identification at the point of being 'responded' to, something which can be manipulated via a text's sequence and levels of diegesis as this chapter's analysis of *Pale Fire* has demonstrated, and which will be explored more explicitly in relation to what I term 'reader causality' in Chapter Four of this thesis. Fiction can give us knowledge of ourselves and our ethics in the way we look at and judge our own re-creations of fictional characters, but with a certain unconscious and solipsistic circularity. To identify as I define it here is to create identities from fragments; to identify 'with' is to describe the way we feel about such characters, our affective allegiance with them. The 'individual' with whom we experience this allegiance alludes to the facticity of the text – our response has something to do with the words on the page – yet ultimately such characters we experience feelings towards are, as has been discussed, subjective mental creations of the reader. We therefore experience emotion towards a kind of self within ourselves.

If characters are a 'self within ourselves', our own subjective mental creations, what does it mean that such depths of emotion have been reported in response to fictional characters? Why has the human race, in Plato's own phrasing, treated fiction as so integral to our everyday existence as to call it a 'lover'? The ethical situations discussed thus far during this chapter have related, for the most part, to various category-based actions such as misogyny and how these can be manipulated via the sequencing of a text, with the sequence-dependent ambiguity of the rape in *Composition No 1* standing as a particularly charged example of variant interpretation. This chapter's analysis of *Pale Fire* explored in greater detail how reader trust in a fiction's

diegesis and a text's sequence can lead to certain interpretations being formed of characters; this chapter also explored how the way in which certain characters are sequenced can invite an exclusionary disgust amounting to abjection. The inevitability of the disgust *Pale Fire* promotes in its reader in constructing the character of Gradus illustrates both the willingness and necessity of readers trying to infer a novel's authority to make sense of a text, and the way in which readers are necessarily led into complicity with what the narrative is doing in an ethical manner.

The final text to be analysed in this chapter, Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Hopscotch*, thematises concerns involving gender, narrative empathy, and interpretation to such an extent that the author gendered the two different methods of reading his novel's sequences, and moreover presents a narrative depiction of rape that, just as *Composition No 1* did, alters slightly depending upon the sequence followed. *Hopscotch* analogises the game of hopscotch's aim of 'heaven' to its protagonist Horacio's search for meaning across South America and Europe, and his almost ritualistic relationship with the fallen Sophia figure 'La Maga', who is repeatedly sexually humiliated throughout the text by various figures including Horacio himself until her rape as a child by a man of anonymous origins is finally revealed.⁸⁸ These events are contextualized differently depending upon the reader's initial choice, a difference which provides an interesting way of beginning to explore the potential ethical aspect of identification and particularly the Gadamerian notion that the interpretation of a text through our own prejudices can show us those prejudices like a mirror. Unlike *Pale Fire*'s implicit and unconscious choice, *Hopscotch* offers a page of instructions at its beginning detailing two explicit paths through the text, one of which apparently incorporates the entirety of another shorter narrative whilst slotting in additional scenes, quotations from other works, and fragments in between the 'normal' narrative action of the shorter work. Depending upon the choice of route through the novel, different identifications would be formed as each reading would involve the exclusion of some pertinent characterizing statements, even the longer text, which would exclude the very short chapter 55 but would otherwise maintain all other chapters of the shorter text (pp. 323-26).⁸⁹ This sequential choice differs from *Composition No 1*, *The Unfortunates*, and *Pale Fire*, all of which rest upon variant sequence rather than the withholding of narrative. Just as the previous texts of this chapter invite responses based on a reader's genre expectations, this 'longer' version of *Hopscotch* offers an obvious temptation for readers trained to uncover all relevant information in their pursuit of a coherent response to a text.

⁸⁸Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), p. 214. All further references to this edition will be given in the text.

⁸⁹ In the longer version of this text, instead of Chapter 55 the reader encounters the very similar Chapter 129, which features an additional thread relating Traveler's studies of Ceferino Piriz (pp. 502-7).

With the additional and often oblique scenes of the longer path through *Hopscotch*, the reader is invited to become more active in his or her need to pragmatically interpret the often unclear context of these fragments and how they relate to the story at hand, as opposed to the more straightforward narrative-based first path chapters. This shorter path is not initially characterized as inferior as a route to that of the reader who decides to follow the longer path of the supposedly more ‘complete’ text, with this page of instructions raising the possibility of the path chosen as being a moral issue. Cortázar writes that the shorter text:

[...] can be read in a normal fashion and it ends with Chapter 56, at the close of which there are three garish little stars which stand for the words *The End*. Consequently, the reader may ignore what follows with a clean conscience. (‘Table of Instructions’, p. i)

Readers are told that they can ignore the parts of the novel they have not read with ‘a clean conscience’. However the very invocation of ‘conscience’ as a concern at all, combined with the idea that this shorter read-through is associated with ‘garish’ devices likely going against the grain of readers attempting to finish the novel as they might normally, may lead the reader to infer that the hypothetical ‘normal’ reader might somehow be ethically inferior to the more ambitious reader. Indeed, this suggest of inferiority has been the stance of many reviews of the novel, dismissing the shorter route through the text either as the province of bad readers or as a route few if any are likely to take at all.⁹⁰ Likewise, the text itself, particularly in its longer form, seems to stress the apparent superiority of the ‘active’ reader who acts as an ‘accomplice’ to the author in constructing a certain kind of text as opposed to the ‘passive’ reader who is blindly led along by set narratives (p. 439).

It is important to note here that if readers infer that one route is better than the other, they are responsible for this evaluation in their inference of authority, as there is nothing *essentially* superior about one text above the other (even if the texts contain diegetic statements about their own superiority, this does not make it true) -- such judgements depend upon one’s evaluative criteria. Readers are caught between traditional authoritative inferences, to read a book in traditional page-to-next-page order without flicking back and forth between fragments of a text (the shorter route) and to read everything within the covers of the book (the longer route). This notion of responsibility is important when the gendering of each route is considered, particularly as any reader choice to comply with a particular inferred authority is perhaps more explicit and conscious here than previous examples of inferring authority in *The Unfortunates* and *Pale Fire* due to the *Hopscotch*’s explicit statements regarding choice not only during the opening instructions but throughout.

⁹⁰ See E. Joseph Sharkey, ‘Rayuela’s Confused Hermeneutics’, *Hispanic Review*, 69.4 (2001), 423-442, pp. 435-438 for a review of these critics.

These different reader types are referred to within *Hopscotch* as passive ‘female’ readers and active ‘male’ readers respectively (p. 439), a gender attribution which many, including eventually an apologetic extra-textual Cortázar himself, have had difficulty in coming to terms with.⁹¹ However, as my analysis will demonstrate, the inferred authority identifiable from this text appears to have no such qualms about linking the feminine to this reader type in the figure of La Maga. The ambitious reader is considered as such not for their willingness to turn pages in an unusual sequence, but due to the more difficult material they will encounter in the longer text; as Garfield claims, this is just a matter of extent, of greater difficulty than the ‘normal’ text rather than something qualitatively distinct.⁹² In his brief analysis of the movement between sequences 15-120-16 and 14-114-117, Sharkey demonstrates these extra chapters ‘often break the novelistic progression of the plot and comment on the actions and thoughts from another perspective’⁹³ -- a perspective Garfield shows to centre around Horacio, with other characters ‘serv[ing] to explain’ him, that they are ‘shadows of [his] possibilities’ as a man.⁹⁴ This text can be seen to thematise its own problems of identification just as *The Unfortunates* and *Pale Fire* did through solipsistic focus upon the protagonist as source of all meaning.

To take Sharkey’s sequence as a starting point for close reading, Chapter 14 (which readers of both short and long textual sequences will encounter) describes how photographs of torture are judged aesthetically by Wong and Horacio. Wong claims that ‘the other pictures [...] were rather disappointing’ (p. 55), with some of the images depicting rape and individuals in excruciating amounts of pain. Eventually, Wong judges these documents to be barbaric and uncivilized only for the sense to emerge gradually that he means this description as an attack on the sophistication of the torture depicted, rather than the use of torture itself: ‘Of course, Peking is not what it used to be. I’m sorry I showed you something so primitive, but one cannot carry certain other documents in his billfold, there have to be explanations, an initiation...’ (p. 56). This ‘explanatory’ quality that prohibits us from seeing the ‘certain other documents’ is made sacred through this word choice of ‘initiation’ and in the narrative description of Wong’s voice that accompanies this, ‘His voice came from so far away it seemed to be a prolongation of the images, the gloss of a ceremonious scholar’ (p. 56).

If readers move directly onto Chapter 15, they would see Horacio remember a night where he was paid to watch a film revolving around an Axis surgeon, with the initial line ‘it was so natural for him to remember then that night’ (p. 57). ‘Then’ seems to refer to the end of Chapter

⁹¹ Evelyn Picon Garfield, *Julio Cortázar* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), p. 108.

⁹² Garfield, p. 107.

⁹³ Sharkey, pp. 436-37

⁹⁴ Garfield, p. 94.

14, so the interruption here occurs at a specific temporal moment. As with Chapter 14, the torture on screen is aesthetically judged – ‘the photography was excellent’ (p. 57). Horacio’s response to this film explores both his own identification and empathy with the victims depicted but also his simultaneous over-aestheticisation of this process:

He had had time to imagine the scene and put himself as always on the side of the victim. There was no reason to waste words on the hanging of whoever-he-was, but if that somebody had known (and the refinement could have been precisely in telling him so) that a camera was going to record every moment of his grimaces and twistings for the pleasure of future dilettantes... (p. 57)

Horacio goes on to exclaim ‘What poor tools we have to find a way out of this dungeon’ (p. 57), claiming that their philosophical searching throughout the novel has given them the capability to lambast non-philosophers for feeling pity over a single known individual when thousands of abstract unknown individuals are dying elsewhere. Horacio says that ‘what it really comes down to is a case of eyes that can’t see’ (p. 58).

In this more direct reading route from Chapter 14 to 15, after raising numerous concerns relating to identification and the depiction of torture and rape, these issues recur in the present with Horacio’s lover La Maga. Another man, Gregorovius, asks if he can know about La Maga’s past so that she’ll no longer be ‘all front, no substance’ (p. 60); this suggestion of a lack of depth in La Maga’s character is reminiscent of both *The Unfortunates*’ and *Pale Fire*’s interrogation of the external versus internal markers of characterisation. In response to Gregorovius, La Maga claims that this suggestion that she lacks depth is nonsense. She reveals that she was spanked by her father, sexualized through juxtaposition with a hint that another resident of her building was masturbating to this action, a man who went on to rape her (pp. 60-62). The description of the rape itself is highly charged, stressing the ‘Negro smell’ of the rapist and talking about the man as if he were an animal (p. 61). This description immediately raises an ethical issue, even for any time period where such language might be considered acceptable; if the reader does not know what a ‘Negro smell’ is, or rejects the notion of a characteristic ‘Negro smell’ as having a real referent that might be found in real life and therefore an offensive comment, the reader still needs to infer *what* the character identified means by this remark to make sense of it, such that the reader becomes complicit in the statement. The utterance is performative, it *brings into existence* such a smell, and in order to conceive of it, the reader must extrapolate from real-life in guesswork. Here, readers are complicit with the text in summoning their own real life values and experience to make sense of the novel, temporarily bringing themselves in line with the authority of the narration, in the same manner as the misogynistic response created in *The Unfortunates*.

La Maga then notices Horacio looking at her in a strange way:

‘Why are you looking at me like that, Horacio? I’m telling how the Negro in the tenement raped me, Gregorovius did so want to know how I lived in Uruguay.’

‘Don’t spare us any details,’ said Oliveria.

‘Oh, a general idea is enough,’ said Gregorovius.

‘There’s no such thing as a general idea,’ Oliveira said. (p. 62)

With this statement, chapter 15 ends.

Now, if readers do not go directly from Chapter 14 to 15, they would encounter two additional chapters, 114 and 117. Chapter 114 features little snippet extracts from an Associated Press Report from May 4th, 195- (the last digit of the date is left blank) (p. 477). In this report a man called Lou Vincent is executed by gas chamber and is observed by ‘53 witnesses watch[ing] through small windows’ (p. 477). The dispassionate news style does not make a judgement upon their viewing, nor does it aestheticize the death beyond recounting its various stages and how long they lasted, contrasting greatly with Chapter 14’s heavy aestheticisation of almost mystical death and pain. Chapter 117 then features a quotation from Clarence Darrow’s Defence of Leopold and Loeb, a famous American court case (1924) where Darrow defended two boys who pleaded guilty to murder with their reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy used as a defence, that the philosopher taught them to do it (p. 481). The quotation in Chapter 117 does not provide this specific context (something which would rely upon extra-textual knowledge, as certain possibilities in *Pale Fire* do), but does explore issues of responsibility and ethics pertinent to that case, the issue of whether someone in a given place and time knew the difference between right and wrong.

Readers infer how they are supposed to relate these passages to the chapters around them, but due to the difficulty and oblique nature of these passages this inference is more stretched and open to idiosyncrasy of interpretation. Readers have no authoritative statements explicitly relating Leopold and Loeb to the torture discussed by Wong’s passage; we must guess as to their relation. The attempt by readers to infer what the novel is asking them to do here therefore forces readers to engage in the text’s procedures with a greater degree of difficulty and effort than they might elsewhere. However as readers still infer purpose behind these extra passages – that the inferred authority has given the reader ‘more’ of the novel in between the chapters of the shorter text – it is little wonder that many readers assume the longer text is superior, due to their need to understand the text and their veneration of the inferred authority as source of meaning. To refuse to read the inferred authority’s whole text would be to reject that authority’s power, to fail to piece together all the ‘parts’ we infer we are being asked to read and put together into ‘meaning’ and plot. We could still only read smaller parts of the text, yet we could

not act like we really ‘knew’ the characters fully due to not having encountered all pertinent details.

A hypothetical reader might judge, for example, that the addition of Chapters 114 and 117 between Chapters 14 and 15 provides two additional, non-aestheticized accounts of murder but which hint at the idea of such violence as a spectacle, potentially indicating how ingrained the apparently outrageous nature of Wong’s appreciation of torture is in Chapters 14 and 15. In addition, the critique of philosophy as a potentially corrupting influence in Chapter 117 provides additional preparatory context for Chapter 15’s attack on philosophers who cannot understand pity for an individual at the expense of abstract thousands (p. 58). Furthermore, the addition of two other accounts of violence builds a cumulative catalogue of violent actions leading into La Maga’s account of rape in Chapter 15, inviting the reader to juxtapose Gregorovius and Horacio’s responses to that account with the critique of those who observe violence in those preceding stories in a variety of cultures.

Likewise, it is possible for readers to go to the interim Chapter 120 after reading Chapter 15’s account of both Horacio’s response to a torture film and La Maga’s rape. If readers choose this path, they would encounter a very dark story about a boy called Ireneo who gets a grub, leaves it for ants, and watches them torture the grub; the boy plans events so that it would be difficult for the grub to escape a hole that is not big enough for it, and further imagines *himself* as the grub in an act of mental self-torture (pp. 119-20). This echoes Horacio’s attempt to imagine himself the victim earlier in the previous chapter, extremely problematically here as this Ireneo is the very same individual who will later in life go on to rape La Maga. Repeatedly throughout the novel Horacio mistreats La Maga and sexually humiliates her, the narrative describing him as a priest and her as a suppliant to be ritually abused both in the dynamics of their relationship and in sexual matters (p. 29). Reading this note here, particularly in the context of previous notes that appear to make torture in some sense ‘sacred’, heightens the link between Ireneo and Horacio. Reading this passage before Chapter 16 will also link Gregorovius to this rapist figure, by the way Ireneo extends the grub’s suffering.

Chapter 16 begins with La Maga stating in reference to her rapist that ‘When he left my room it was almost dawn and I didn’t even know how to cry any more’ (p. 63). As opposed to what the reader might expect in terms of a sympathetic response from her friends and those who listen, only a very few characters present respond in such a way; the majority of onlookers just reference music and philosophy in response to La Maga’s rape, joking about it:

The only funny thing, as always, is the diabolical separation of form and content. Everything you've said is exactly the same as what happens between lovers, except the slight resistance and the probably stronger aggression. (p. 63)

Gregorovius responds that the rape is 'not a subject for jokes' only for Horacio to retort 'You were the one who dragged it out, friend' (p. 63). La Maga herself latches on to this judgement of Gregorovius as the figure who most wanted to know the narrative facts of La Maga's rape, repeating 'He dragged it out [...] Now he'll start saying how he didn't enjoy it' (p.63). There is a sense of *schadenfreude* in wanting to know more about La Maga's character, about this rape, linked by the story to the act of rape itself, of placing yourself in the part of victim, of in some sense enjoying the depiction of pain. Moreover, both Horacio and La Maga evoke the figure of the reader who might decide to read the 'longer' narrative in their condemnation of Gregorovius as 'dragg[ing] it out'.

Cortázar's binary opposition of the female/male passive/active reader – foregrounded here for its association with the most infamous example of such an opposition in gender difference – is itself false, not just for reasons of gender equality but due to the instability of 'activity' and control as categories in narrative (discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two of this thesis). Readers of the longer text are no more in control of the text's construction than they would be in the shorter text; they just have more content to juxtapose and alter their identifications, different information to inflect their readings, not more. And due to the path taken, they are immediately aligned with Horacio himself, a figure so identified with the 'active' reader that Cortázar himself claimed he identified with the character,⁹⁵ that Horacio almost possesses partial inferred authority status in that readers are likely to infer his quest to be aligned with that of the text as a whole. Gregorovius is the kind of reader to be disgusted with, the kind who prizes narratives and plots at the expense of the transcendent. This disgust can easily be self-reflected back upon completionist readers for their wish to get full meaning from a text however difficult, which is different from Gregorovius 'dragg[ing] it out' only by the matter of its extent and our apparent diegetic place outside of the narrative. By drawing that kind of reader into this self-awareness, the 'clean conscience' of such readers is indeed blotted; they are not superior to readers of the shorter text who may lack self-awareness of what they are doing to a greater extent but might still exercise restraint in restricting themselves to the 'straightforward' narrative and defying any inference that the 'longer' text is better. The way the reader *feels* about what he or she is doing – his or her sense of responsibility – will become crucial in subsequent chapters and so such reader self-awareness is important for our understanding of the ethics of identification going forward. Moreover, the instability of the 'passive' versus active reader distinction here has

⁹⁵ Garfield, p. 80.

broad implications not only for novels but, perhaps surprisingly, control-based video games, a subject explored in the next chapter.

Although the ‘real’ Cortázar apologised for his attribution of ‘female’ to the passive reader and claimed it was just an adoption of terminology received from elsewhere,⁹⁶ the inferred authority implied by this text seems to frame La Maga as representing that ‘female’ side of the binary in the narrative of *Hopscotch*. In responding to La Maga as we do, in trying to learn more about her character, we are fulfilling the function of reading itself and cannot be said to be engaging in an actual crime against a real human being, against real suffering. La Maga is not a real specific woman ‘affected’ by her depiction due to the fact that La Maga exists only *as* a synthetic depiction. However, the aesthetic implications of the reader’s search to ‘discover’ La Maga’s history and interiority can be said to make explicit the problems inherent in certain kinds of reading practices; the reader’s attempt to extract all relevant information, feel a variety of emotions, and to implicitly accept the text’s typifying of various groups with phrases such as ‘female reader’ and ‘Negro smell’ cannot help but have implications for the ethics of reader construction of character.

For example, in Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of another rape victim, the fictional character Lucy from J.M Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), she begins one of her claims in the following manner:

‘Insofar as Lucy is a figure that makes visible the rational kernel of the institution of marriage — rape, social security, property, human-continuity’...⁹⁷

Spivak makes explicit the extent to which her claim will work ‘insofar’ as a fictional character can be considered to have ethical importance and relation to the real world as if they were a real human being. The nature of this ‘insofar’ — this limited extent of a character’s ability to be interpreted as real and relevant to the real world — is not examined by Spivak, and this is a limitation in much of her discussion of identification and the wider attempt by theorists to consider response to interpersonal alterity through the use of fictional examples. For example, Spivak warns against the colonizing powers of identification and argues that we should apprehend the Other *as* Other without judgement or invasion, rather than attempting to locate ourselves within him or her. In this argument, Spivak reverses the liberal humanist assumption that entering into another’s self might be ethically valuable and that same appreciation of otherness that characterized much of reader response and reception theory’s ethical turn. However, the warning may prove undesirable, as Bart Moore-Gilbert writes:

⁹⁶ Peter Standish, *Understanding Julio Cortázar* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), p. 99.

⁹⁷ Gayatri Spivak, ‘Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching’, *Diacritics*, 32.3-4 (2002), 17-31 (pp. 22-23).

An insistence on the irreducible alterity and muteness of the subaltern, one might argue, paralyzes not just the subaltern, but the would-be ally of the subaltern – who is left in the double-bind of being required to show solidarity without in any way “selfing” that Other or “assimilating” her to the degree that solidarity perhaps inevitably demands [...] if its account of subaltern alterity and muteness were true, then there would be nothing but the West (and the native elite, perhaps) to write about.⁹⁸

If we consider that Spivak applies such ethics to our response to fictional characters in her theories as well as real individuals, as in the aforementioned example of Lucy from *Disgrace*, the situation becomes even stranger. When authors construct characters and readers infer those characters’ attributes, we simultaneously use ‘real’ individuals as frames of reference (and therefore these individuals can be analysed in subaltern studies and such ethics can be applied to either the writer or the reader’s act) but they are simultaneously *not* real individuals, and therefore there *is* no real individual’s ‘Otherness’ being invaded. We are identifying something that mimics real-life Others, but is fundamentally not a ‘real’ person inasmuch as it is just a character.

The distinction between the mimetic and synthetic aspects of character is important to maintain theoretically even if it does not in fact occur purely in any real identification, and we cannot therefore evade the synthetic nature of character when discussing the ethics of these processes. The character is both person and ‘unperson’, mimetic and synthetic, real and unreal. A character is simultaneously treated as a person and not a person at all, these two aspects inseparable by definition (for if it is considered purely as if it were not a person or not pertaining to an entity, then it would not be a character at all; and if it were considered purely as a person, it would supersede the status of a character). Fictional characters are not human (only existing in the reader’s mind) and yet are representative of real humans, even inasmuch as they reference generic traits, emotions, and experiences. So, therefore, is the reader reconstruction of a rape an ethical matter, if no rape actually occurred and a description of a fictional iteration of the action is just interpreted by the reader? This is the paradox: yes, of course it is ethical (the depiction relies upon the act having occurred in the real world), and, at a technical, fastidious, inhuman level, it does not seem to be an ethical matter at all (the act did not occur, and words on a page are not people). Ironically, this is where Spivak commits a partial version of the same acts of colonization and reducing of alterity she warns against – the statement “insofar as Lucy is a figure that makes visible the rational kernel of the institution of marriage [...]” reduces Lucy in

⁹⁸ B. Moore-Gilbert, ‘Spivak and Bhabha’, in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by H. Schwartz and S. Ray (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 451-6, cf. in *Theory After ‘Theory’*, eds. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 151.

part to the categories she possesses membership of and thereby demonstrates ala Richard Walsh that Lucy *is* just reducible to such values.

However, as I have also argued, reader belief in the unity of characters and the reader's inference as to a text's authority *do* matter in the interpretation of fiction. In his chapter I have shown how such beliefs and trust in authority emerge from and are shaped by the sequences of texts. In the next chapter I will move beyond this to show how such engagement with sequences leads to a sense of control, not just for players of video games but also for readers of prose novels. In grappling with the process whereby reader emotional investment can bias the interpretation of narrative, I will begin to build an alternative theory of identification that more clearly accounts for the role of fictionality in the ethics of this process.

CHAPTER TWO: Control in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the *Bioshock* Series

1. Introduction

In Chapter One, I argued that prose novels invite readers to perpetuate the ethical situations found within their narratives; if a character in a novel is misogynist, for example, the novel's readers must perpetuate the character's misogyny in constructing such details from the novel's sequence if they wish to read the novel. Likewise, in their construction of fictional characters, readers are not necessarily just motivated by a wish to understand the text (*a priori*, a reader wants to read) but likely by their emotional and aesthetic engagement. A paedophile such as Charles Kinbote from *Pale Fire* is quite capable of inviting sympathy and reader allegiance not just when he presents himself in a dream as seeking amends but in the humour, interest, and excitement of his narrated life, regardless of his ethics that might in a real-world sense lead to another's disgust with him. Emotional engagement is a powerful force in driving reader construction of character, but with regard to fiction the bias such engagement might produce has not been examined in its full implications for the ontological and ethical status of the characters produced. Video games provide an ideal point of comparison and contrast with novels here, as the player's emotional engagement in a game can affect decision-making regarding the bifurcation of the diegesis into multiple paths; the explicit nature of such engagement thereby provides a tangible version of what might be implicit and less obvious processes of identification operating in novel reading.⁹⁹

Narrative video games seem to provide adequate source material for a study of control, with their choices, multiple endings, and explicit control of avatars, but as I will argue in this chapter, such categories as choice and control are unstable in video games with fascinating implications for novels in comparison. Games and novels are not mutually exclusive narrative types with radically different affordances as many have claimed, yet neither are they close to being identical in the experiences they offer to readers and players. Only once we acknowledge the similarities between these mediums, however, will their differences become instructive in a way

⁹⁹ Texts that require 'non-trivial' effort by readers or players have frequently been termed 'ergodic', a phrase popularised in Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997). This term is frequently applied not only to video games but texts such as *The Unfortunates*. However, the term tells us little about either text type, as shown in Newman's argument that even video games are not ergodic in their totality due to their 'punctuat[ion]' by non-gameplay non-interactive sequences, preferring instead to view an 'ergodic continuum' as existing in video games. This thesis takes the opposite approach to Aarseth and asks how so-called 'non-triviality' might be a function of *all* texts to some extent, comparing video games back to novels. The term 'ergodic' provides few opportunities for such a discussion.

that will not only benefit video games criticism but also assist with theories of identification. Whether video games are narratives at all is often under question in the ‘narratology vs ludology’ debate as discussed by this chapter, and even those theories that *do* attend to narratives in games often focus upon abstract gameplay mechanics more than they examine narrative elements. This chapter will intervene in these concerns and explore the instability of control in video games, comparing two texts that both experiment with their respective medium’s affordances for identification and ethical choice and both with a similar post-apocalyptic setting and parent-child theme: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and the *Bioshock* video game series (2007-13).

2. Control and Procedural Rhetoric in Video Games and Prose Novels

Video games represent a tangible form of the synonymy between character and reader so often implied by theories of literary identification, immersion, and empathy. The player of a video game directly alters some aspect of a character’s life, usually but not always piloting the physical movements of a character and likewise sometimes controlling that character’s decision-making power in deciding what actions he or she performs within the diegesis of the video game. This can be seen, for example, in *Bioshock* (2007) where the player can choose to save or murder young girls who hold a potential source of gameplay-beneficial power, or in the role-playing games created by the company Bioware, which often allow the player a large amount of choices regarding the protagonist’s moral actions. There is a spectrum of video games that allow players selective control over the fictional characters depicted, but not always in the same ways. ‘Quick Time Events’ (QTEs), movement options in games where the player impacts slightly upon cut-scenes by pressing certain buttons in time to the prompts on screen, are considered by many critics to represent little more than film-like texts where you can move a character from side to side but otherwise have little impact upon the course of diegetic events; criticism of *The Order: 1886* (2015) focussed in this regard upon a cinematic, linear quality as a strong negative factor in evaluations of the game.¹⁰⁰

This approach does not always lead to negative criticism, however, as long as the game play is sufficiently developed to offer a mechanical challenge (something many reviewers judged as being poor in *The Order*), as often reviewers will praise the power of video game narratives where much emotion is found in non-interactive film-like cut-scenes such as *The Last of Us*

¹⁰⁰ *The Order: 1886*, dir. by Ru Weerasuriya and Dana Jan (Ready at Dawn, 2015); Martin Robinson, ‘The Order: 1886 review’, *Eurogamer*, 19 February 2015 <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-02-19-the-order-1886-review>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

(2013) (which I analyse in Chapter Four).¹⁰¹ This suggests that being able to alter the diegetic events of a game is not a requirement for strong feelings of immersion and narrative empathy, something evident from responses to novels and films. The extent to which we can control diegetic events in a game is mechanically medium-specific, but much video games criticism to date has focussed more upon the abstractions these control schemes relate to and indeed games that prioritize mechanics rather than considering the implications of choice-making for character construction and narrative empathy. Ironically, in an attempt to differentiate video games from prior forms, such theories do not fully account for those features of some video games which most excite and interest many players, unnecessarily simplifying control schemes of games to focus on physical control of avatars and often side-lining other narratively significant possibilities.

There are indeed clearly many video games where although it might be possible to discuss narrative at the most basic of levels, these games simply do not even have a meaningfully enough developed narrative element to be discussed in such a way. Such games either represent mechanics (such as *Tetris* (1984) or *Pong* (1972))¹⁰² or hold a thin layer of narrative to roughly contextualize mechanical actions but where this narrative is for the most part irrelevant to the experience (many repetitive mobile games such as *Candy Crush Saga* (2012) would fit within this category).¹⁰³ These games are considered by theorists such as Jesper Juul as ‘abstract’ games as opposed to the more narrative-driven games referenced above such as *Bioshock* where narrative contextualisation of events is considered more important to the experience of the game.¹⁰⁴

There has been a bias in much theorisation of video games towards more abstract elements of games at the expense of their narratively significant components. For example, in his book *Half-Real* (2005) Juul divides games into a scale ‘between emergence and progression’, the former defined as a strategic type of game where the rules lead to emergent behaviour on the part of players and the latter defined as a step-by-step game with a predetermined way of playing it.¹⁰⁵ Two commonly used metaphors in video games criticism and reviewing are that of the ‘sandbox’ game – the emergent game where a world is created for the player to explore and create his or her own story, such as many titles in the *Grand Theft Auto* series or *Minecraft* (2009)¹⁰⁶ – and the ‘theme park’ game – the progression game where players are given a guided,

¹⁰¹ Oli Welsh, ‘The Last of Us review’, *Eurogamer*, 31 July 2014 <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-07-28-the-last-of-us-review>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

¹⁰² *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984); *Pong*, designed by Allan Alcorn (Atari, 1972).

¹⁰³ *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012).

¹⁰⁴ Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 131.

¹⁰⁵ Juul, p. 71.

¹⁰⁶ *Minecraft*, created by Markus Persson (Mojang, 2009).

curated experience where they follow the steps provided for them to a large extent. However, as Joris Dormans writes in his review of *Half-Real*, Juul appears to evaluate ‘games of pure progression [as] poorly designed, finite and ultimately boring [...] the contrast between emergence and progression is a valid one, but with the poor development of the latter type, such games can hardly compete with games of emergence’.¹⁰⁷

The problem, however, may be with the games studies field itself in so frequently attempting to develop these ‘theories of everything’, accounting for such a large range of experiences and genre types that they frequently fail to represent each category under discussion or show clear bias for those games that seem most different from the experiences presented by prior media. Games criticism often de-emphasises the importance of narrative in narrative-driven games when narrative is clearly important in said titles. For example, when Jesper Juul analyses the ethical choice-driven *Deus Ex* (2000)¹⁰⁸ his analysis is limited to brief mentions of its abstract emergent elements, such as the number of ways proximity mines could be deployed or a stealth mission could be completed.¹⁰⁹ Such components are important to understanding gameplay, but considering much of the rest of Juul’s work de-emphasises narrative, it seems a missed opportunity for analysis. The protestations of the ludology versus narratology debate that games are frequently inappropriately considered narrative are not without merit; some games do resist such analysis. However, it could be argued in return that not every theory of games has to address all kinds of game. Some games demand this kind of strong narrative focus in our analysis of them, as I would argue *Deus Ex* does in part; it would be impossible to properly understand *The Last of Us* (2013) or *Bioshock* (2007) without considering their stories and characters as much as their moment-by-moment shooting mechanics. There are limit cases of course, such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), a game that frequently presents characters and pre-determined narrative situations created by the game’s writers; however, in these limit cases the moment-by-moment experience for the majority of players may be more concerned with the intricacies of multiplayer competition, cooperation, and advancement with this narrative as a pleasing contextualising backdrop for play as opposed to a core motivator for player emotion as it most likely is in a game such as *The Last of Us*.

However, the problem is that game studies frequently uses such limit cases as prime examples in its attempt to create its universal theories of gaming; titles such as *World of Warcraft*, aided by their mass appeal and pop cultural relevancy, frequently find themselves taking pride of

¹⁰⁷ Joris Dormans, *Half-Real: A Review* (2005) <<http://www.jorisdormans.nl/article.php?ref=halfreal>> [accessed 1 September 2015]

¹⁰⁸ *Deus Ex*, dir. by Warren Spector (Ion Storm, 2000).

¹⁰⁹ Juul, pp. 76, 81, and 111.

place whenever narrative is mentioned in the works of theorists such as Alexander Galloway. Indeed, Galloway intends for his work to cover the totality of gaming:

The superimposition of these two orthogonal axes—machine and operator, diegetic and nondiegetic—is a deliberate attempt to embrace a broad theory of gamic action. I wish to make room here for the entire medium of the video game.¹¹⁰

When diegesis is explored in terms of player-action, Galloway argues that:

Diegetic operator acts appear as either *move acts* or *expressive acts* (two categories that are more variations on a theme than mutually exclusive). Simply put, move acts change the physical position or orientation of the game environment. [... Expressive acts] are actions such as select, pick, get, rotate, unlock, open, talk, examine, use, fire, attack, cast, apply, type, emote. Expressive acts can be rather one-dimensional in certain game genres (the expressive act of firing in *Quake* or *Unreal*, for example), or highly complex, as in the case of object selection and combination in strategy or adventure games.¹¹¹

His prime examples of diegetic actions in games involve such acts as moving character position in a game world, rotation, or expressive acts such as firing a weapon; for such ‘expressive acts’, he does include ‘select’, ‘talk’, and ‘emote’ in his list of possibilities in such a way as might correspond to a narratively significant action, but they are found amongst a longer list of otherwise physical manual actions. Although Galloway’s model does not exclude the possibility of such diegetic actions as choosing to save a friend or doom a romance in his model of player choice, these types of texts and game are barely discussed in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, quite simply because in the attempt to create universal theories of gaming such texts would clearly be outliers that would complicate Galloway’s argument in a way that would misrepresent the majority of the kind of games he clearly wishes to focus upon. Movement gameplay is frequently irrelevant to meaningful narrative, however, and so marrying ‘diegesis’ as a term to such gameplay is misleading. For example, consider the comedian Dara Ó Briain’s joke about the elite soldier Solid Snake in *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) crouching around the battlefield and repeatedly pausing in combat situations to check menus under Briain’s inept guidance;¹¹² no reasonable player would then attempt to reconcile the game narrative’s depiction

¹¹⁰ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 8.

¹¹¹ Galloway, pp. 22, 24.

¹¹² ‘Dara Ó Briain on Metal Gear Solid – Live at the Apollo – Series 6 – BBC Comedy Greats’, *YouTube*, 4 April 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWQXzGTzM1g>> [accessed 10 November 2016]; *Metal Gear Solid*, dir. by Hideo Kojima (1998).

of Solid Snake as an elite soldier with insignificant or inept player control, hence the basis of Briain's joke involving the mock question as to what Snake's superiors must think of these questionable 'erratic at best' movements around the battlefield. Not everything that occurs under player guidance in a game world necessarily has to be associated by players with their co-created story of 'what happened' in that game's narrative, but equally this does not mean that narrative elements of games are somehow completely separate and un-gamelike compared to other components. A nuanced middle ground attentive to the specificities of text and sub-genre is required to navigate this complex field.

It is therefore important to make clear at the outset of this thesis's discussion of games that there is no attempt here to provide a theory of video games that somehow covers all types of game, and therefore no attempt to resolve debates of whether we should use ludological or narrative frameworks for our analysis of games, quite simply because this thesis only concerns itself with narrative-driven games and therefore to avoid a consideration of this element would be absurd (in a way it might not be if, say, *Mario* and *Tetris* were introduced to the analysis, therefore rendering the relevance of narrative to the entire set of all games as obviously less relevant than it is if we analyse a certain narrative subset of games in isolation). Moreover, in my comparison between games and novels, I am not attempting to repeat the mistakes of past criticism in claiming that video games are just like novels or films, but quite the opposite; I am attempting to see whether novels are in some sense like video games, a direction of intent that tries to revive a sense of the strangeness and strategy with which we encounter novels rather than focussing too much upon the newness of video games.

For example, games have rules and request explicit player input, two affordances we rarely associate with novels and other non-game narratives. Juul argues that the answer to the question of whether games present narratives is dependent upon the definition given to the word, of which Juul suggests several have been used by games theorists.¹¹³ For Juul, the importance of rules in games partially discounts them from being considered totally narrative, and moreover the definitional criterion from prior media of 'narrative as the presentation of events' is not fulfilled for Juul in video games as 'games are not just *representations* of events, they *are* events'.¹¹⁴ In order to account for this notion of games as events, Juul proposes the concept of 'half-reality' as explaining the ontology of video game characters and player actions, writing that 'a statement about a fictional character in a game is *half-real*, since it may describe both a

¹¹³ Juul, p. 157.

¹¹⁴ Juul, p. 158.

fictional entity and the actual rules of the game’,¹¹⁵ and describes a hermeneutic circle whereby fiction and rule systems in games cue each other into being in the player’s mind:

The way a given object or character behaves will characterize it *as a fictional object*; the rules that the player deduces from the fiction and from the experience of the playing of the game will also cue him or her into imagining a fictional world.¹¹⁶

Juul demonstrates that there are various degrees of abstraction in video game control systems – for example, kicking a football on screen requires very different action to an embodied version of the same experience in real life – and considers simultaneous real world and fictional world activity:

In *Tomb Raider* (Core Design Ltd. 1996), we click the keys on the keyboard, but we are also moving Lara Croft. In these examples, the *actions* that we perform have the duality of being real events and being assigned another meaning in a fictional world. Additionally, since our actions take place in time, that time shares the duality of being both real time *and* fictional world time.¹¹⁷

This simultaneous presence in the real world and in a fictional world is often called ‘immersion’ and ‘presence’, two terms that are shown by Gordon Calleja to have originally emerged from hypotheses regarding virtual reality experiences but to have been gradually extended to both traditional on-screen video games and even other art forms such as prose novels and films.¹¹⁸

As with Juul’s comments on narrative theory and video games, Calleja believes this use of the word ‘immersion’ in relation to novels and films to be an over-application of the term, claiming that ‘even if we argue that certain qualities of the medium and text in question afford such an experience, the phenomenon remains within the domain of subjective imagination’, and that ‘the essential quality of [presence] lies within the ability of the system to recognize and react to the user’s actions and spatial location’.¹¹⁹ For Calleja, the processes of ‘recognition’ and ‘reaction’ by the system do not occur when reading novels, and he describes this exclusion further in one of the more complete contrasts between video game and novelistic immersion in extant criticism:

¹¹⁵ Juul, p. 162.

¹¹⁶ Juul, p. 177.

¹¹⁷ Juul, p. 141.

¹¹⁸ Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 18.

¹¹⁹ Calleja, p. 22.

[There is] a distinction between simply imagining one is present in a scene and the considerably different phenomenon of having one's specific location and presence within a virtual world acknowledged by the system itself. In an imagined scene, whatever happens is simply willed by the imaginer, who usually knows that she is directing the composition and events of the scene. In the case of a game, we can think of the player as being *anchored*, via her avatar, in the game world, allowing the game's environment and entities to react to her. This aspect of games fundamentally alters how the player perceives herself within the world, and is not present in literature, films, or personal imagining. When we identify with a character in a movie or book, or imagine we are in the same room as the protagonist, we have no way of altering the course of events, no way of exerting agency. Likewise, the environments and characters represented in these media have no way of reacting to our presence, no matter how strongly we identify with them.¹²⁰

Much of his argument in the above extract relates primarily to what Calleja terms elsewhere in his book 'kinesthetic involvement', the ability for one's anchored avatar to tangibly interact with objects in the game world or physically navigate throughout defined spaces – whether being in 'the same room', a 'specific location', physically 'anchored', or having actual 'presence' in the on-screen environment.¹²¹ The majority of video games do indeed feature such movement, from simple abstract games such as the *Super Mario* series where Mario can traverse a two-dimensional environment or *Mirror's Edge* (2008) where the player can engage in first-person parkour across rooftops.¹²² Calleja's central theory of 'incorporation' (a term Calleja believes to be more accurate than 'immersion') is likewise built upon a heavily kinesthetic basis, and Calleja defines incorporation as 'the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar'. Moreover, Calleja argues that 'two particular dimensions – spatial and kinesthetic – form the cornerstone of the incorporation experience'.¹²³ In many ways, Calleja's attention to simultaneous presence in the worlds outside and within the game repeats Juul's notion of 'half-reality', but with a greater focus upon kinesthetic involvement and physical presence.

Although Calleja suggests a binary distinction between novels and games, many video game examples problematize Calleja's ideas, particularly with regard to his focus on movement and

¹²⁰ Calleja, pp. 22-23.

¹²¹ Calleja, p. 55.

¹²² *Mirror's Edge*, written by Rhianna Pratchett (EA Digital Illusions CE, 2008).

¹²³ Calleja, pp. 169-70.

kinesthetic control. For example, some games might involve text-based decisions, such as early text-based adventures like *ZORK* (1977) or elements of modern role playing games where decisions must be selected from text-based narrative, such as *The Banner Saga* (2014).¹²⁴ An argument could be made that text-based games still rely upon a degree of kinesthetic involvement – the textual descriptions of environments in games cue the reader to spatially locate what is happening in terms of movement and space in a given scene, and in later games such as *The Banner Saga* other visual elements, such as trees and grassland around the text window, further assist in the player's imaginative efforts. These text-based game narratives do not represent Calleja's tangible 'anchoring', however, and so it could be argued that this is not true incorporation as defined by Calleja, just as he argues that prose novels do not represent true immersion.¹²⁵

However, it can be argued that here is no such thing as a stable instance of what Calleja terms incorporation. There is a spectrum of involvement and control between games which have direct control of avatars and games which represent that movement via text prompts or even button prompts. There are multiple examples of games that varyingly require different types of control, such as the aforementioned game *The Banner Saga* where at various points players control the movement of their characters on a chess-type board and also many role-playing games such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), which varies between direct control of the avatar during exploration and combat, but with control of a text-based menu overlaid upon this character when engaging in dialogue.¹²⁶ *Dragon Age: Inquisition* moreover offers the player a choice between multiple methods of character control even in movement-based kinesthetic sections, allowing switching between direct control (moving the WASD keys on a keyboard or a controller's analogue stick will move a character accordingly) and a tactical camera where characters can be ordered to go to various locations clicked upon but where the game fulfils this movement for the player.

Models of video game analysis often unnecessarily simplify the complexity of control models and immersive control of video game avatars upon abstract models that do not truly represent the actual systems of a given game, particularly as developing technology and programmer skill in the medium present possibilities as yet untheorized in their full implications. Many of these games analysis models do not consider recent developments in player input, such as Nintendo's Wii remote which allows the player to move a controller in real space to perform actions on screen (so swinging it like a golf club would cause a golf club on screen to similarly move),

¹²⁴ *ZORK* (Infocom, 1977); *The Banner Saga* (Stoic, 2014).

¹²⁵ Calleja, pp. 22-23.

¹²⁶ *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware, 2014).

Microsoft's Kinect camera sensor which aims to provide similar immersion in a game but using a player's entire body and hands to perform actions in the on-screen environment, and Sony's PlayStation Move which provides a combination of both a Wii-style remote and a Kinect-style camera to track more accurately. All of these devices allow physical kinesthetic incorporation in a way that traditional controllers can merely abstractly represent. It is highly interesting that very few violent games exist for these devices, often involving cartoon or non-bloody versions of fighting, perhaps due to the ethical implications for the similarity of performing a physical action with an intent to harm in an actual embodied sense with that which might harm a real living individual.

Beyond these motion controllers, as of their September 2015 incarnations virtual reality devices such as the Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear VR, HTC Vive, and Sony's PlayStation VR all allow the player an even greater sense of incorporation, with accurate head-tracking and positional-tracking meaning that if the player turns his or her head in real life, the display they see before their eyes will alter, and so, combined with cinema-style 3D depth, the player's mind is tricked into a sense of actual inhabitation of the environment depicted, as almost all accounts of VR devices attest. However, even here, abstraction and complexity in kinesthetic incorporation complicates matters. The Oculus Rift, for example, allows positional-tracking, meaning that if the player bends forwards or away from the computer to which the device is tethered, then they will move closer or further away from the object in real space; Samsung's Gear VR headset does not allow this affordance. HTC Vive's VR system involves the use of a 'lighthouse' laser-emitting base station somewhere within the area where the player is using the headset. This 'lighthouse' device tracks players as they walk around any small environment with two PlayStation Move-style controllers to actually touch and interact with objects in the VR environment, allowing a very different style of incorporation to the Oculus Rift's seated experience. As this technology is in its infancy in 2015, even more products are being developed, such as treadmills, rotating chairs, eye tracking, and more, all of which promise to introduce even more methods to enhance the VR experience but which each still involve a degree of complication and sacrifices to achieve their particular aim and which may therefore render their expensive promises moribund. Even if we argue that VR represents an extreme end of a spectrum of immersion, with prose novels on the other end of this spectrum, it is not clear that this spectrum could be plotted on a single line. Each medium only partially creates a sense of actual presence, and even within each medium there are varying degrees of presence invited by texts such as the examples above of multiple control schemes in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Banner Saga*, switching between different ways of interaction for various kinesthetic effects. There are strata and branching trees of control types even within individual games, let alone in

the whole medium, and not a straightforward and linear spectrum from control to a lack of control.

Both Juul and Calleja insist that there is a radical difference between prose novels and video games on the basis that video games allow actual performance of action and that video games provide recognition of player input and presence in a rule-based system. Not only are these systems more complicated than their definitions in these theorists' work might suggest as I have demonstrated, but prose novels *can* in fact share some of the elements we might more normally associate with video games, even if these elements work in medium-specific ways. Games are not actually altered by choices; the software generates game states that may alter during a play through but the base game is not usually rewritten or changed forever in a material sense by a player's actions, always re-startable or available for a new player. In many senses, this is a tangible metaphor for how readers mentally generate characters and interpretations from sequences in material texts, emerging from the device but temporary and distinct from the original. In this manner, a form of kinesthetic incorporation and an acknowledgement of the player's presence within the diegesis of a text occurs in relation to every single text analysed in Chapter One of this thesis. Interpretation, character construction, narrative empathy, and even various diegetic facts for individual readers are determined in each text by the sequence in which sections are read; by opening the box in *The Unfortunates* and *Composition No 1*, or by opening the covers in *Hopscotch* and *Pale Fire*, the reader's physical presence in relation to the artefact is made more explicit than it might be if a reader were just turning pages in a bound codex or clicking the 'next page' input on a Kindle e-book reader. More than this, the reader's physical actions actually have an effect upon the presentation of a story in a way sanctioned and made necessary by the system. In *Hopscotch*, the reader is presented with two paths which further make explicit the role of page-turning as a kinesthetic 'playing' with a text, with rules and an ethical outcome, whilst as Simon Rowberry's map of all the links between sections in *Pale Fire* demonstrates, an extensive amount of page turning and reader movement around the pages of the text is invited by *Pale Fire*.¹²⁷

All of these choices may not involve directly acting as a specific character in the diegetic world of the story, but neither do the decisions in many of the above games. In many games, the player can choose which areas to visit first and this sequence may affect various diegetic elements. An example of such a situation can be found in the *Mass Effect* (2007-12) series of games where the character of Legion is added to the player's team of selectable companions late in the

¹²⁷ Simon Rowberry, *Pale Fire as a hypertextual network* (2011)
<http://www.ht2011.org/demos_posters/ht2011_submission_137.pdf> [accessed 1 September 2015].

overarching narrative.¹²⁸ If the player has purposefully delayed certain events in the game that were made available much earlier on, *Legion* will have narratively significant interactions with the characters of those earlier events played out of the usual sequence, such as boarding a ship composed of his racial enemies who will wish to either experiment upon or kill him. The player's choice to follow a certain sequence can certainly be considered part of the medium-specific video game experience here, but this is functionally little different to choosing a particular route through *Hopscotch*, encountering sequences differently in *Composition No 1*, or following various lines of narrative through *Pale Fire*. It is not enough to differentiate games entirely from novels by saying any reactivity or acknowledgement that readers might feel by the system is entirely imaginary (as critics have done so). Readers *have to* infer meaning from prose novels by stringing together impressions and details from throughout a text as prose narratives would be meaningless without this way of reading. Therefore it makes little sense to say that reader inferences as to sequence are 'imaginary'; if such inferences are imaginary, then so is every aspect of the interpretation and emotional staging of prose novels.

There is another manner in which some prose novels invite an indisputable sense of physical presence on the part of readers. *Pale Fire* also exists as a 'found document', a novel with a preface, poem, commentary, and index by two fictional authors which assumes the reader likewise exists in this same diegetic world as if he or she has purchased a book composed by this 'real' commentator Kinbote. The reader is referenced by Kinbote throughout his narrative, as Chapter One demonstrated, and even in the metafictional destruction of the reader's assurances as to Kinbote's reliability, the reader's action in the 'miracle' of reconstructing fictional characters from the book is foregrounded. The system acknowledges and foregrounds the reader's presence in the real-world in an incorporated sense, and in this way *Pale Fire* could be seen to be comparable to Christine Love's game *Digital: A Love Story* (2010),¹²⁹ which features a fictional but mimetically accurate MS-DOS style environment with the player diegetically interacting with a computer just as they play the game on a computer in real life, or Simon Barlow's *Her Story* (2015),¹³⁰ a game depicting a searchable police computer featuring interviews with a woman whose husband has disappeared.

Although in none of these novels do readers physically control characters, their physical activity in reading the novels acts as part of the system through sequence, suggesting that Calleja's exclusion of novels from incorporation may be justifiable but that the distinction is not entirely stable. Moreover, as this chapter's analysis of control schemes and virtual reality has

¹²⁸ *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-12).

¹²⁹ *Digital: A Love Story* (Christine Love, 2010).

¹³⁰ *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015).

demonstrated thus far, every single instance of video game immersion and incorporation that exists involves some level of metaphor for presence, even if virtual reality does invite a sense of presence better than many other mediums. Prior theory has focussed more upon abstract emergent mechanics in video games than the implications of such systems and control schemes for player construction of the fictional characters they control, attempting to fight a battle that overly simplifies binary oppositions between narrative and gameplay in a way that reverses post-structuralist attentions to fuzzy sets and blurred definitions. Video games are capable of a great many experiences, many which are likely not yet created, and to therefore defensively insist upon the radical difference between video games and prose novels is pre-emptive and does not even account for limit cases such as *The Unfortunates*, *Composition No 1*, *Hopscotch*, and *Pale Fire* which implement some systems quite similar to various elements we might consider integral to video games. Prose novels such as these even have a rule-based element to them, and although it is a medium-specific kind of rule system quite different in kind to the very tangible rule systems of video games, it is worth noting that players are not usually aware of all rules in video games. Emergent combinations of rules in video games suggest that such systems are highly complex and partially idiosyncratic in how an individual player interprets and works with them, involving an imaginative basis that could be compared to the imagined ‘inferred authority’ of correct and incorrect interpretation a reader might engage in within a novel reading experience.

A key analogue to this argument can be found in Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric in video games studies, which serves to demonstrate a crucial narrative affordance of the video games medium.¹³¹ Procedural rhetoric accounts for the way in which rule systems of various games encourage certain kinds of behaviour from players in order to succeed, therefore inviting players to run through the steps of a rhetorical argument through the actions of a game and understand how systems work, making arguments about a range of processes including moral and political claims.¹³² Conversely, as mentioned last chapter, Slavoj Žižek considers the way in which video games might not necessary represent a positive social force but might reveal an arena to explore ethics precisely due to the combination of explicit action with a lack of real-life consequences:

Consider the interactive computer games some of us play compulsively, games which enable a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It’s all too easy to assume that this weakling

¹³¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2010), p. 2-3, passim.

¹³² See also Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (London: MIT Press, 2008), p. 103 for Bogost’s similar arguments regarding the way in which simulations communicate ideology.

takes refuge in cyberspace in order to escape from a dull, impotent reality. But perhaps the games are more telling than that. What if, in playing them, I articulate the perverse core of my personality which, because of ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in real life? Isn't my virtual persona in a way 'more real than reality'? Isn't it precisely because I am aware that this is 'just a game' that in it I can do what I would never be able to in the real world?

Chapter One briefly explored the above quotation in relation to analogous cases of prose-based fictional characters and reader complicity in their construction, revealing the kind of person the reader might be. In the context of video games analysis, however, it is necessary to re-examine Žižek's remarks here. Although his central principle may or may not be correct – the idea that we might act out behaviour in games that we cannot in real-life, revealing 'the perverse core' of a personality – his hypothetical video gamer is a media-induced stereotype, drifting from 'some of us' to 'neurotic weakling' with a 'dull, impotent reality' and composed of a 'perverse core' which we are told twice in a row will not be 'able' to do things in a 'real' sense. This reduces those who play video games – a 1.2 billion-strong membership engaged in a \$10.5 billion dollar industry and composed of a 40% female player base with an average age of 34 years¹³³ – to a very grotesque and pallid stereotype of a sexually emasculated male. Whilst there are doubtless many players who may fit this model, it is important to note that Žižek's argument is unnecessarily weakened by such a narrow image of those who it might apply to. If a sixth of the world's population both male and female might be articulating fantasies and the 'core' of their personalities in the most financially successful medium of fictional entertainment currently available, this has far more fascinating implications for how people construct and engage with fictional characters in different ways than if an entire medium were merely some misogynist sexual power fantasy as Žižek suggests.

However, this being said, many video games do have problems with misogyny both in diegetic depiction and in player response, as Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2013-15) documentary series has demonstrated both in its own claims and in the widespread vitriol, hate mail, and death-threats Sarkeesian received from a small but highly active group of individuals calling themselves the 'Gamergate' movement.¹³⁴ Moreover, to answer the second

¹³³ 'How Much Do You Know About Video Games?', *Entertainment Software Rating Board* <<http://www.esrb.org/about/video-game-industry-statistics.jsp>> [accessed 1 September 2015]; Dean Takahashi, 'More than 1.2 billion people are playing games', *Venture Beat*, 25 November 2013 <<http://venturebeat.com/2013/11/25/more-than-1-2-billion-people-are-playing-games/>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

¹³⁴ *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, dir. by Anita Sarkeesian (Feminist Frequency, 2013-15); Paula Mejia, 'Feminist Video Game Critic Receives Bomb Threats at Award Ceremony', *News Week*, 18 September 2014 <<http://www.newsweek.com/feminist-video-game-critic-receives-bomb-threats-award-ceremony-271557>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

contention by Žižek that games often involve ‘the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women’, if there is little evidence that series such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty* might cause murders – if this were the case, the millions of people who have played these games would form a global menace. Conversely, however, the ubiquitous nature of the trope of a ‘man with a gun’ and the popularity of violence in games in general is perhaps troubling when compared with other mediums.

In video game criticism, the player’s decision to kill individuals in a game is an often overlooked problem due on the one hand to the histrionics of journalists and lawyers such as Jack Thompson who believe several games to be ‘killing simulators’,¹³⁵ and on the other hand due perhaps to fear of censorship if such elements were given direct attention and ethical analysis. Killing a character in a video game is, in a sense, not the same as killing someone in real life not only due to the ontological distinction between a fictional piece of programming code and a real life human being, but also due to the character’s irreplaceability. The human being in real life cannot be resurrected, whereas most video games can be reset or replayed with that character alive again. In a consequentialist sense, a murder has been committed – even if fictional or deemed a ‘deletion’ or act of point scoring and therefore largely unlike a murder of a real human, to stretch the term ‘murder’ to its limits an individual has still been erased. Likewise, although no decision is apparently involved on the part of a reader, if a character in a prose novel dies, the page can just be turned back again and that character will once more live. However, there is more at stake in these concepts than mere mechanical replayability; these processes also have implications regarding the *type* of character that is killed. The killing of an individual that is fully characterized and personalized by the player, present throughout cut-scenes, or even perhaps directly controlled throughout a game might carry far greater narrative significance within a single play-through of a video game than the killing of a randomly generated individual in a given game might. This is the kind of enemy character without a personalised history that is spawned by a game to provide a momentary challenge but whose absence will soon be filled by another enemy, having no real narrative significance beyond such challenge.

As with my analysis in Chapter One of Wendy in *The Unfortunates*, some characters are perceived to have less reality than others; some conform to patterns in a repertoire of stereotypes available to a given fictional world, readily replaced by alternate versions of women or zombies or militiamen depending upon the narrative’s antagonistic forces, whether a video

¹³⁵ Winda Benedetti, ‘Were video games to blame for massacre?’, *NBC News*, 20 April 2007
<http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18220228/ns/technology_and_science-games/t/were-video-games-blame-massacre/#.VeW_i_ZVhBc> [accessed 1 September 2015].

game or otherwise. Why cry over the death of an unknown soldier in *Julius Caesar* (c.1599) when Brutus's fall is in contention for narrative significance?¹³⁶ Would we rather Tony Soprano die in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) or a random mobster without a great deal of characterisation?¹³⁷ Why spare a moment's thought for an enemy bemoaning his madness in *Bioshock* when, after his death at the player's hands, moments later a similar enemy with an identical voice actor and characterisation will spawn? None of these alternate characters are likely to be important for readers, players, or audiences because such characters are void of narrative detail or emotional significance. It is not impossible for emotion to emerge from brief characterisation, but there is often a correlation between the depth of knowledge it might be possible to hold about a character and a sense of that character's 'reality' and emotional potential. The next section of this chapter will apply concerns relating to control, emotional engagement, and the ethics of acts of murder so ubiquitous in video games to an acclaimed novel first of all instead of a game in order to provide an initial point of comparison in an alternate medium – Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

3. Inferred Authority and Allegiance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Can Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* save the world? Suzanne Keen's arguments regarding the failed empathy-altruism hypothesis might suggest that the answer to this question should be 'no'. Indeed, the many nations where this novel became a critically acclaimed bestseller, spawning a genre of descendants in film and video games, have not altered their policies regarding the environment since the novel's publication. Likewise, public ethics have not radically changed, suggesting that the historical record might once more show a lack of evidence for a novel producing altruistic effects.

However, initial response to the novel was quite optimistic about the novel's altruistic potential. This question of whether *The Road* could save the world was posed and answered in the affirmative by George Monbiot in *The Guardian* just over a year after the novel's publication. Monbiot claimed that *The Road* 'could be the most important environmental book ever' and that the novel might 'have far more influence in the next 30 years than any number of statistics and front line reports'.¹³⁸ The 'oppressive, horrifying and poetic' potential of the text was seen to be capable of exercising a superior didactic effect upon its readers than statements of fact, an effect

¹³⁶ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. by David Daniell (London: Arden, 2006).

¹³⁷ *The Sopranos*, created by David Chase (HBO, 1999-2007).

¹³⁸ George Monbiot and others, '50 People Who Could Save the Planet', *The Guardian*, 5 January 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/jan/05/activists.ethicalliving>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

linked to the success of McCarthy's characterisation of the protagonists. The novel relates the journey of a father and son in a post-apocalyptic scenario where they encounter various sets of characters along the road who will usually attempt to attack, capture, or eat the protagonists. The majority of reviews and criticism on the novel view the father and son's ethics as representative of what seems to be the old world (seeming recognisable and relevant to many readers) and their antagonists' ethics as representative of the post-apocalyptic (seeming alien and cruel to many readers). The reader's potential ethical allegiance with the protagonists is taken to hyperbolic levels throughout many of these responses -- Clive Sinclair, for example, claims that 'some deep sympathy' makes the father and son 'human and knowable to us, causes us to care almost beyond bearing about their fates, and so makes us read on compulsively for fear of what might happen to them. And us'.¹³⁹

The text of *The Road* is seen by these reviewers as having an imperative power that political propagandists might only dream of. Again, perhaps these reviewers were hasty in their judgement, as we might determine from the world's lack of serious action on climate change in the years since the novel's publication. Yet the case is notable for its positivity about how readers might respond to the novel's characters and the potential ethical benefits of this 'compulsive' relationship, a situation which is often viewed more negatively; as I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, there has been a fear echoed across hundreds of years of literary criticism that certain fictional forms invite an excess of identification, that readers might blur the boundaries between their own selves and the characters they read about and mimic their actions in reality. Renaissance theatre, the novel, the comic book, the video game -- contemporary reception of each form feared this response, to the extent that a film's audiences were claimed to be at risk of 'psychic infection' from the characters on-screen. But why do readers, critics, and literary theorists persist in making arguments on either side of this debate? Camus posited that a 'tradition of humiliated thought' recurs with religious and other attempts to overcome death's finality; so too is the power of narrative empathy proclaimed endlessly in spite of a lack of evidence throughout the literary world, with *The Road* perhaps this argument's most recent peak. This chapter's analysis of *The Road* will treat reader sentiments as to the novel's power as indicative of potential devices within the text which may generate such feelings in some readers -- that the novel has an almost utopian power -- regardless of whether this feeling is really 'correct' in a real world sense.

¹³⁹ Clive Sinclair, 'Words for the End of the World', *The Independent*, 17 November 2006
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-road-by-cormac-mccarthy-424545.html>>
[accessed 1 September 2015].

As I have demonstrated, control is not consistently offered in all games or even sometimes within the same game, with the game's programming shifting what can be controlled and when. In light of these arguments, what is there to be learned from the instability of such control in games if in novels there appears to be no such control? Instead, in novels there might seem to be something like a procedural rhetoric of fatal inevitability where no matter what the reader wants to happen such wishes will not come to pass for no control is possible; in such a formulation, readers are slaves to the 'fear of what might happen to them. And us' raised by Sinclair. I would argue that as with debates over the ethical powers of literature, these questions seek dramatic answers and do not consider alternative, even semi-obvious possibilities for a subtle dialogue between novels and video games. What if novels are sometimes sequenced by their authors in such ways as to vicariously play with the extent to which a reader's wishes come to pass? Indeed, can texts manipulate their readers so that readers are likely to feel what a text wants them to feel, whether such texts are games or novels? The idea of a sequence manipulating emotion and desire is nothing new, whether in Aristotle's *Poetics* (c.335BC) or modern advertising;¹⁴⁰ the distinction between games and novels lies within what these sequences manipulate their readers and players to do, and even then it is a matter of medium affordances rather than radically different experiences.

In games, players control avatars; in novels, readers simultaneously apprehend ensembles whilst piecing together scraps of individuals in a paradoxical distance combined with intimacy. This paradox is created not just through the lack of kinesthetic incorporation of the reader into a specific character but through the sequential development of each character in prose fiction via sentence upon sentence. The reader is required to recall prior characterising details and fill in gaps contextually at a rate not demanded in media that feature a greater range of stimuli such as image and sound. In novels, each narrative device whether direct speech, visual description, metaphor, simile, and so on, will add to this growing and partially idiosyncratic web created in the reader's mind containing each reconstructed character, a sum greater than its parts. A character constructed from a prose novel is a collision of textual facts with reader wishes that are already compromised by a novel's invitations and manipulations of said wishes.

Even if we do differentiate between what is actually happening in our experiences with narrative and what readers *think* happens as the *product* of narrative experiences, the fact that readers think certain things occur in the narrative experience can still be indicative of important parts of fictional stories' effects. To use an analogy, magical thinking arises from the wish fulfilment of a baby – a baby cries, someone feeds it, and the baby feels satisfied. For the baby, its omnipotent crying has summoned the parent and ended hunger. What is the qualitative

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

difference here with reader belief in the unity of character and narrative wish fulfilment? If readers are invited to want something to happen and it does, is there no subconscious affirmation of control? In this manner, I will argue that the dynamic between emotional engagement with textual values and our subsequent ongoing recuperation of characterising details into unified figures is manipulated in *The Road* to lead the reader to an agreement with a conclusion that does not logically follow from the particulars of the text, but the incoherency of which is masked by a more powerful sequential manipulation of reader empathy.

In the first half of *The Road*, the son, having been shielded from tough ethical choices by his father, does not entirely seem to understand the father's claims that strangers are 'bad guys' until a series of three encounters early in the novel, and neither, perhaps, does the reader.¹⁴¹ Readers do not know if other people hold these 'bad' values until they see them enacted in the narrative. The first cannibal entices the pair to danger: 'We got a man hurt. It'd be worth your while [...] I'll bet that boy is hungry. Why dont you all just come on to the truck? Get something to eat. Aint no need to be such a hard-ass' (p. 67). The father responds to the first invitation by asking 'do I look like an imbecile to you?' (p. 67). The reader may follow his 'seeing' of the danger and the logic behind his responses, and judge whether allegiance with the father's authority as focaliser is a 'correct' or rewarding way of exploring the text. To compare the reader's action here with video games theory, the reader might not necessarily 'adopt the screen persona' of Žižek's 'macho aggressor' in reading *The Road*, but in the reader's attempt to infer authority and develop patterns of expectation in response to the novel's plot, we may develop a game-like sense of strategy and opinion about what the characters of the novel should do in various situations. This wish for certain things to occur may then attach itself to a trust in certain characters not exactly as with an avatar but more as a strategy beneficial to the reader's emotional activity. This activity can in turn lead to ethical consequences as with decision-making in games. The novel's system will not necessarily in Calleja's formulation 'recognize and react to the user's actions and spatial location', as for Calleja, even if 'certain qualities' of novels allow a sense of presence, 'the phenomenon remains within the domain of subjective imagination'.¹⁴² However, as demonstrated in Chapter One, texts such as the 'book in a box' *The Unfortunates* which presents multiple sequences to the reader demonstrate the contingency of reader construction of characters upon a particular sequencing of a text. If the reader can be shown to be ethically responsible for inferring authority in stereotyping a female character in a given reading of *The Unfortunates*, then although its sequential contingency might be less

¹⁴¹ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2007), pp. 80-81. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁴² Calleja, p. 22.

obvious, nothing prevents fixed sequence texts such as *The Road* from being analysed in a similar way.

Therefore, to continue with this first cannibal encounter, the reader might follow the father's 'seeing' of the danger and the logic behind the cannibal's responses – 'I'll bet that boy is hungry. Why dont you all just come on to the truck? Get something to eat. Aint no need to be such a hard-ass' (p. 67) -- and may judge whether or not allegiance with the father's authority as focaliser is a 'correct' or rewarding way of exploring the text. In order to judge the father's viewpoint as worth of aligning with their own wishes, readers need to verify whether the stranger does indeed present danger. We need to know whether the values associated with the father allow him to succeed, however we define success in this narrative, in order to assess what the text's rhetorical argument is and how we as readers might passively and even unconsciously form strategies as to what *we* might do regardless of the text's lack of affordances for control or interaction. Upon his shooting of this man and the father's return to the scene later on, the father discovers proof of that group's cannibalism: 'Coming back he found the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts [...] They looked to have been boiled' (pp. 73-74). The father says of this to the boy, and perhaps to the reader, that: 'You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know.' (p. 80). In his private thoughts on the cannibal, the father reflects on humanity:

This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word (p. 79).

The father reads the whole world around him as presenting 'lies', with the only source of truth his own tentative ethical engagement with his son.

The success of the father's prediction of the cannibal's nature and the stakes at play in that encounter, may provoke the reader to anticipate other textual encounters as 'lying' threats to be seen through and to identify with the father's position. For example, the second encounter with cannibals acts as a hyperbolic extension of the first – a 'phalanx' of cannibals arrive, dragging children and women with them for later rape and consumption for food. This time, the fact of their evil is not emphasised, but of how great they are in number, and this emphasis comes from the boy, not the father – 'There's a lot of them, those bad guys' (p. 97). The boy -- and the reader -- are learning not to trust individuals other than the father, something which is important to the rhetorical gambit of the text moving forward into the second half. Even the father cannot entirely be trusted as a protector by the end of the first half of the novel -- the father and son

enter a house that will turn out to contain a larder full of trapped individuals in an episode featuring one of the only instances of prolepsis in the entire text:

Piled in a window in one corner of the room was a great heap of clothing. Clothes and shoes. Belts. Coats. Blankets and old sleeping bags. He would have ample time later to think about that. The boy hung on to his hand. He was terrified. (p. 113)

This prolepsis signals to the reader that the father is not reading his environment correctly and that he will think about the meaning of what he sees only later with ‘ample time’. The father is no longer as attentive to potential threats – ‘All these things he saw and did not see’ (p. 115) – whereas the boy, repeatedly expressing his terror, finally *does* realise the predicament of this world.

This sequence of cannibal encounters, when considered as part of the reader’s early and gradual process of establishing an idea of the father’s authenticating role in the narrative, establishes certain ‘warning’ predictors and characterizing details that, through repetition and manipulation, encourage certain responses towards *all* non-protagonists in favour of the ‘good guys’. The father is right to be cautious and violent without direct evidence in the first half of the text, and is proven to be so with subsequent narrative events. Reader pre-emptive categorization of all others as ‘cannibals’ proves advantageous and correct as a strategy of constructing characters in *The Road*. A reader who feels allegiance with the father and son might wish for them to flee at the appearance of strangers regardless of any comment provided by the father once this pattern has been established, inducing a game-like sense of strategy. In all of the above encounters each cannibal is utterly replaceable in a narrative sense, acting as ill-defined, almost faceless figures of evil and vanished humanity that do not exist beyond the brute facticity of their endless numbers. The death of the first cannibal is merely the death of one instance of a respawnable and replaceable enemy character, just like a combatant in a video game, whereas the father and son -- nameless though they may be -- are characterized through interaction, direct speech, memory, and focalization via an extensive character space as the only characters featured at all for the first sixty pages or so, generating a more comprehensive sense of reality and allegiance than the more narratively replaceable cannibals.

However, it is important to distinguish between empathy with these characters due to a sense of the protagonists’ goodness and that which might arise merely due to the novel’s in-depth characterisation of the protagonists as individuals in a sympathetic and multi-faceted manner. Reader disgust and attraction towards textual characters does not necessarily involve any actual ethical responsibility towards these characters in the way readers might, for example, judge the goodness of real-world cannibals, survivors, or victims. For example, a useful control-test for a

reader's response to *The Road*'s 'bad guys' might be found in the film *We Are What We Are* (2010).¹⁴³ The film depicts a broken family unit of cannibals in the aftermath of their patriarch and hunter's death. This cannibalism is explicitly ritualistic and not out of a want of other food sources, although due to their upbringing the family believes it to be an ethical imperative only to eat human flesh. This evokes not only *The Road*'s cannibals but the father's inverted decision *not* to eat human flesh due to an opposite standard of goodness (p. 136). The eldest son in the narrative displays similar virtues of love and self-sacrifice to *The Road*'s protagonists, biting his sister's neck in order to fool the police into thinking she is a victim of rather than participant in their cannibalism, even though this will lead to his own execution by his shocked brother. Prior to this apparent 'redemption', even when engaged in outright cannibalism the eldest son invites audience allegiance, struggling not only with patriarchal expectations of becoming their 'hunter' but with his potential homosexuality. The moment at which he accepts this potential by kissing the boy with whom he has had a long flirtation appears a triumph of western liberal openness. As a result, the ethical weight of his subsequent planned cannibalism of this lover for the benefit of his family might be placed by the viewer not upon this betrayal but upon the family's moral outrage over the homosexual status of the human they would be eating. The particularities of the victim are ignored by the narrative's inferred preference for the well-being of the eldest son as chief focaliser. This control-test example demonstrates the possibility of allegiance with a cannibal and sympathy for his family, even when they are ritual murderers rather than acting out of starvation. This full visual depiction of their horrific behaviour, something overcome by the narrative's focalization and sympathy for that murderer, is not in itself proof that cannibalism does not inherently preclude allegiance. However, this situation does suggest that whatever the reader might believe to be 'good' or 'bad' behaviour, these views perhaps have less to do with why these 'bad guys' incite repulsion than the carefully manipulated focalizations, selective use of detail, and affective weight discussed throughout this analysis.

The example of *We Are What We Are* furthers my conclusion regarding *The Unfortunates* in Chapter One that even experiences of narrative empathy so elementary as to merely involve the beginnings of a simple attempt to understand a novel might lead to the temporary establishment and acceptance of an ethics contrary to the reader's own. To reconstruct a mental sense of fictional characters and a given text, we must see what it is like to hold the thoughts of these characters in order to comprehend or inform an opinion about them, just as to talk about the colour red is to imagine that colour. In so doing, even if the reader's own understanding of ethical possibilities will be used to define his or her belief in what the novel is saying -- reversing the original temporarily-adopted ethical stance inferred from a text -- the initial temporary adoption of those values can still be said to have occurred regardless of any later

¹⁴³ *We Are What We Are*, dir. by Jorge Michel Grau (Artificial Eye, 2010).

aversion. With regard to *We Are What We Are*, we can see that ‘aversion’ towards a text’s depictions of certain behaviours or groups may not always necessarily occur even if the reader or viewer believes those behaviours to be despicable, as long as the narrative provides enough elements for readers to understand the behaviour of the protagonists and if these characters work towards some element the reader might enjoy in the text such as conflict or excitement (as I analyse in Chapter Three with regards to Jed Parry versus the narrative foil Clarissa in Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*).

The deployment of stylistic effects to alter readers’ wishes and therefore their experience of narrative empathy can be seen vividly at the mid-point of *The Road* where the reader’s prior strategy of likely believing all strangers to be dangerous cannibals becomes gradually untenable. In the second half of the novel, the same behaviour of caution and violence without evidence or personalisation of these strangers on the part of the father leads to moral condemnation by the son and emerges as incorrect by the way narrative events unfold. The kind of characterizing details associated with the son, often the authenticator of the father’s ‘readings’ in the first set of encounters, begins to shift in such a way as to make reader allegiance with the father gradually untenable at the same time as engaging with strangers becomes increasingly valued. In turn, new avenues of description encourage personalisation responses to strangers which are all the more powerful for the text’s breaking with the conventions of its first half. This is a critique not just of the father himself but of the novel’s own procedures self-reflexively up until this point, procedures which the reader has followed; as the shift is subtle rather than jarring, the reader may not necessarily be invited to directly question their own acceptance of the novel’s inferred authority up until this point (unlike *Bioshock*’s central reveal, as will be explored later this chapter), but neither is their prior allegiance with the father likely to be entirely forgotten, leading to pathos rather than total condemnation of the father’s actions in the second half.

The transformation begins with a comedic reconfiguration of all the values and descriptions of the first half into the figure of an old man at the mid-point of the novel, a character who I will revisit in Chapter Three in relation to reader mediation between multiple characters. The first cannibals were depicted as ‘shuffling’ – this old man is described as ‘shuffling’ at his first appearance (p. 171). The father oscillates between curiosity, ‘Well, he said. Who’s this?’ to paranoia, ‘it could be a decoy’, only to delay judgement between these two positions, ‘Let’s just follow [...] if this is an ambush he goes first’ (p. 171-72). The old man similarly moves between a comic lack of awareness at potential dangers – ‘The traveller was not one for looking back’ (p. 171) to sudden fear or petty mistrust:

I dont have anything, he said. You can look if you want.
We’re not robbers.

He leaned one ear forward. What? he called.
I said we're not robbers.
What are you?
They'd no way to answer the question (p. 172).

The dialogue between the two acts as a parody of the cross-purposes the father spoke at in his first cannibal encounter, unable to usefully communicate with another human being. Here, however, the old man becomes unreal and less threatening the more human he becomes, and vice versa. The old man collapses and is described as looking 'like a pile of rags fallen off a cart', a pathetic but warmly objectifying simile somewhere between the awful 'heap' of looted goods in the cannibal house and the 'vile rags' the father forces a thief to place into their cart later in the narrative, presumably leading to that thief's death from the cold (p. 274). The boy foreshadows his later reaction to the thief by using the same words in response to this old man's appearance: 'He's scared, Papa. The man is scared' (p. 172). This authenticates the old man's lack of threat, and although the father and son may end up offering assistance to another here, the way in which they are described as doing so works to alter the course of the novel's rhetoric argument regarding paranoia and altruism in such a way as to diminish their perceived value and authentication by the world of the text.

The lesson learned during the first half of the text – do not trust or engage with others – is being rewritten through an appeal to a different standard of characterisation to the comparatively mimetic models of the first half of the text. The old man or the later-encountered thief are less characterised than the personalised father or son, but are practically unique individuals when compared to the cannibals of the first half of the text. When the old man is introduced in this moment of transition between the two halves of the text, all characters – even the father and son – are rendered comedic. Henri Bergson suggested that comedy emerges from something like flat characterisation – 'the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in the exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine'.¹⁴⁴ The father's initial mistrust of the old man continues far beyond the point authenticated by the text, with the boy altruistically asking 'what about a spoon?' only for the father to reply in an almost Beckettian fashion 'He's not getting a spoon' (p. 173). The life-or-death ethical stakes of the father and son's opposing tendencies towards selflessness and selfishness are reduced here to matters of politeness. Likewise, humour can be seen as a release valve for tensions prior to this point, inviting a temporary suspension of the kinds of strategy the reader might have developed up until this point. It is this transition, among others, that can be argued to mask the ethical transition of the text's argument – there is enough continuity of values enough to maintain a

¹⁴⁴ Henri Bergson, 'Laughter' in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 61-189 (p. 79).

sense of these characters as apparently coherent across the novel, but the reader's emotional responses to these values and sense of authentication is steadily compromised and shifted via the personalisation of non-protagonists combined with the father's mistakes in authenticating threat.

This careful sequencing and masking of the ethical transition of player wishes in *The Road* could be contrasted with a less-sophisticated and potentially unintended manipulation of player decision-making in the video game *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014).¹⁴⁵ Here, the player assassinates various figures involved in a plot surrounding the French revolution, with the majority of killings involving not the main target of each assassination but narratively replaceable and template-based guards who often share identical lines of dialogue, uniforms, and faces with previously defeated guards. The player's avatar, Arno, is depicted as morally righteous for the most part in his intentions throughout the game is non-controllable cut-scenes and ambient dialogue, but at one point due to disagreements with his superiors and his romantic interest Elise, Arno is exiled to a town outside of Paris where his descent into alcoholism is depicted by the narrative skipping ahead several years. Arno has fallen from the precision, skill, and eloquence he once possessed, and the narrative places a great deal of significance upon non-interactive cut-scenes showing a brawl with a man who steals the player's watch. In the midst of all this, Arno is reduced to thievery in trying to steal wine from an inn. However, the game's designers do not alter the game's assassination system for this mission, but instead surround the wine casket with a variety of guards highly similar to the guards surrounding major revolutionary figures throughout the narrative. This means that to steal wine, the player has little choice but to murder multiple people due to the placement of these guards, and even more bizarrely Arno's combat skills in a highly inebriated state are exactly the same as they were in his prime.

When Arno leaves his exile and returns to Paris as a sober man, the serial killing for wine is never remarked upon. A case could be made for this whole sequence showing the depths to which Arno has sunk, but the narrative's constant tools for showing such narrative change mainly consist of cut-scenes and dialogue. The assassination missions themselves are treated as less narratively significant and more as representations of a pre-set story, as the title's game over 'desynchronisation' failure screen suggests when the player normally tries to murder civilians, informing the player that the character Arno would not do this. The poorly conceived convergence of narrative significance with gameplay mechanics in this wine-theft incident does not mean that narrative should be ignored in analysing such mechanics. Rather, this situation demonstrates that such departures from a text's normal style of characterisation and

¹⁴⁵ *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, dir. by Alex Amancio (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014).

expectations about what a character may or may not do might lead to breakings of narrative empathy and to the player or reader purposefully ignoring contradictory characterising details in order to continue to make sense of the text. Some reviewers such as Andrew Webster might unify these wine murders as part of a larger picture of Arno's personality:

Arno has basically no memorable personality traits, aside from the fact that he's a sociopathic killer. There's a scene where he kills multiple people just so he can steal some wine and have a drink. Afterwards, he doesn't express remorse: he's just mad someone stole his watch while he was passed out from drinking. He's an incredibly unlikable lead. Of course, storytelling has never been *Assassin's Creed's* strong suit.¹⁴⁶

However, the narrative suggests repeatedly in cut-scenes and in mission objectives that Arno is passionate to a fault and would not harm innocents, emphasised by the way in which the game will restart itself if Arno attempts to harm civilians. Considering the narrative context beyond this moment and the brevity of this mission, these murders might not be inferred to be a twist designed to establish his sociopathy, but rather an example of poorly thought-out games design that the player does not necessarily need to associate with other characterising details, as if forgetting the embarrassing behaviour of a friend.

As I suggested in Chapter One's in relation to *Pale Fire* and narrative twists, plot events that heavily contradict the themes, tone, or integral parts of the belief system generated by particular readings are often rejected, leading readers to declare certain actions 'unbelievable' or 'implausible' for a certain character to be involved in. For example, some readers might claim that Bruce Wayne, whose parents were killed by a gunman, 'wouldn't' use a gun despite narrative depiction of him doing so. Such claims suggest a higher-level character formed within the reader's mind that is, beyond a certain point, no longer beholden to the inferred authority of a text; he or she represents a character that has gained, or exceeded, that status in communities of readers. Such situations where readers generate working models of what characters would or would not do can be likened to the physics concept of potential energy where exerting force upon an object will cause potential energy to be stored based on position only to be released, such as drawing a bowstring to release it. So too can reader generation of characters be seen as a potential energy version of the control seen in video games, an emotional wish-based investment in what characters themselves might choose to do and with the text 'firing' or 'misfiring' according to whether later-encountered characterising events succeed in either fitting reader expectations or persuading the reader to adopt new expectations or wishes.

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Webster, "'Assassin's Creed: Unity' review: bigger doesn't mean better", *The Verge*, 14 November 2014 <<http://www.theverge.com/2014/11/14/7214853/assassins-creed-unity-review>> [Accessed 1 September 2015].

Based upon the reviews the novel has received and the testimony of real readers, *The Road*'s transition from a first half depicting a world of hostile strangers to a second half suggesting the father's error in not attempting to trust strangers has not led to any rejection of the novel's second half. Rather, these two halves appear to have been easily synthesised by the majority of readers into a highly emotional narrative capable of utopian potential in 'sav[ing] the world'. This situation is quite some distance from the 'incredibly unlikable lead' of *Assassin's Creed: Unity* despite both texts sharing a sudden shift in the way their protagonists operate and the morality of their actions whilst both texts likewise seem to try to present worlds continuous with that presented before the alteration. Earlier, I cited Richard Walsh's argument that the mimetic coherency of characters does not necessarily matter because the reader forms emotional responses to characters via a web of values. The reader's sense that he or she is responding to an individual rather than in response to values associated with an individual emerges as a by-product of interpretation, not as the beginning of the chain. I claimed, however, that the reader's belief that they are responding to individuals is still highly important and worthy of analysis. Potential reader construction of characters in *The Road* demonstrates this belief in action. In *The Road*'s shift between multiple types of characterisation and values, the novel's use of comedy and other devices helps mask the ethical transition of the text's argument in a way that *Assassin's Creed: Unity* fails to. The continuity of values and other elements in *The Road* helps the reader maintain coherency of characterisation but with various other elements steadily undermined to alter the reader's sense of strategy as to threats and ethical action within the world of the novel.

For example, the boy's greater presence as an authenticator is initiated in their comedic interaction with the old man and is continued throughout the second half, with the father asking the boy 'What do you want to do? [...] What do you think?' (p. 205) ostensibly in order to teach him. Yet the father's old values fail every single time. When the pair encounters a small group, the boy recommends 'I think we should lay in the weeds for them' as they aimed to do with their first encounter, only for this group to be revealed as a family with a pregnant woman in their midst (pp. 206-08). When they see evidence of a fire in the distance, the boy asks 'What if it's an army?' (p. 210), only for it to transpire that the cannibals (and they were cannibals, as we find the body of a baby at their campsite) 'ran away. They saw we had a gun'. (p. 211). In both of these cases, the boy attempts to respond to threats that transpire to be less clear-cut than they initially seem, whilst the sense of father and son as potential threat to others is gradually emphasised. The boy's altruism is introduced in the first half of *The Road* where it is shown to be infeasible in relation to the world of cannibals; it is then applied to an unthreatening old man and then re-evaluated by the second half of the text. Readers are invited to position the boy through similar trials of 'seeing' his world to those the father underwent in the first half of the

text and likewise undergo those same trials themselves as readers making potential choices via their wishes.

When they are robbed later in the novel, the father and son pursue the thief. When the ‘bent’ thief with ‘stinking [...] vile rags’ is eventually sighted, his description links him ambiguously both to the malicious cannibals and the harmless old man (p. 273-74). The thief brandishes a knife like the first cannibal did, but actually responds to the father’s threat and relinquishes it (p. 274). All of these details indicate that this threat is not quite the same as the others, a sense which reaches its crescendo when the thief is briefly allowed to focalize the narrative: ‘The thief looked at the child and what he saw was very sobering to him’ (p. 274). In turn, the boy’s authenticating role returns in favour of the thief and not his father – ‘Papa please dont kill the man’ (p. 274) – with the thief’s response juxtaposed with the boy’s emotion on his behalf: ‘The thief’s eyes swung wildly. The boy was crying. / Come on, man. I done what you said. Listen to the boy’ (p. 274). The father then steals the man’s clothes, recalling the stripped ‘heap’ within the ‘grand house’, even evoking the same pettiness behind the father’s earlier amusing refusal to give a spoon away to the old man: ‘The shoes. / Come on, man / The shoes’ (p. 275). The thief is then allowed to focalize for a second time, attentive to the emotional wellbeing of the boy: ‘The thief looked at the boy. The boy had turned away and put his hands over his ears. Okay, he said. Okay’ (p. 275). The thief appeals for the father to ‘listen to the kid’, to pay attention to his authentication and claiming equal human status, ‘I’m starving, man. You’d have done the same’ (p. 275). The father’s retributive action is explicitly irrational, his only response being that ‘you took everything’ (p. 275).

Just help him, Papa. Just help him.
The man looked back up the road.
He was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die.
He’s going to die anyway.
He’s so scared, Papa.
The man squatted and looked at him. I’m scared, he said. Do you understand? I’m scared. (p. 277)

The father acts in the same manner he has done throughout the novel, as indeed his earlier readings of threat were often based upon being ‘scared’, but here his judgment seems misplaced. Due to the novel’s manipulation of character, it is no longer enough that the father is ‘scared’, as the boy has played a crucial enough role within the text to disrupt and limit likely reader agreement with the father’s values at this point through his withdrawal of support. This disruption is underscored when the father fires a flare gun at an attacking archer. The father asks ‘they left you here, didn’t they?’ to a woman he finds nursing the man he has killed, only for the ‘curs[ing]’ woman to respond ‘I left myself here’ (p. 283). It might not be said that the father should not have returned fire at an attacker, but that the assumptions behind his act – some

guesses as to the inhumanity of the house's inhabitants – are shown to be spurious. In the second half of *The Road*, the enemy is much more like 'us' than either the pair or their reader might find comfortable, to the extent that the father lies to the boy after this incident and claims he did not kill anyone (p. 289). Otherness is valued in a portion of a text that earlier discouraged it as dangerous. If the reader feels uncomfortable with this contradiction, it might be due to a memory of having believed such violence to be necessary earlier in the novel as opposed to now being predicated on a mistaken view of these strangers as inhuman.

Throughout *The Road*, the text presents standards of characterisation, outcomes in response to different situations, and ethical consequences in such a way that would be incoherent if made in the form of a standard non-fictional argument, but which succeeds here precisely due to the reader creating an idea of these characters as unified human beings and the sequence's manipulations of reader wishes. In *The Road*, the emotional engagement readers experience is manipulated through various emotional peaks and gambits so that the majority of readers will not notice the claims of the text's rhetoric moment by moment have changed – its underlying values and ethics have altered – inviting readers to shift their wishes along with it, masked by the unity of persons and characters. If it had been a different group of characters to experience the events of the narrative's second half, it would not have had the same rhetorical effect – personal history within a prose novel matters, bound by paradoxical apprehension of the ensemble and intimacy with individual aspects of characters sentence by sentence.

As mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, Clive Sinclair claims that 'some deep sympathy' makes the father and son 'human and knowable to us, causes us to care almost beyond bearing about their fates, and so makes us read on compulsively for fear of what might happen to them. And us'. This sympathy, this knowability, this caring – it is all a highly effective piece of rhetorical trickery, resulting from potential reader 'acceptance' of inferred authority and the text's manipulation of the reader's wish for certain narrative events to occur. Although games in contrast seem to offer explicit choices that allow direct control, there are always elements that are not controlled, whether the actions of other characters or other parts of the avatar's behaviour. Even in games it could be posited that player's wishes for certain events to occur must often remain wishes rather than be enacted. However, if this is the case, how do player 'wishes' interact with the ways in which players *can* enact direct control in video games, and what might this say about the nature of choice in novels and in video games overall? The comparison between wish-making and direct control might produce different results in an internal comparison of such elements within a single game than in a hypothetical comparison between such different-seeming elements as a video game and a novel, and so the final section of this chapter will explore these processes in the *Bioshock* series.

4. 'A man chooses, a slave obeys': Control and Inevitability in the *Bioshock* series

'Would you kindly. Powerful phrase. Familiar phrase.'

With these words, the apparent antagonist of *Bioshock* (2007), Andrew Ryan, reveals the game's central twist, foreshadowed moments beforehand as the player passes a wall with 'Would you kindly' spray-painted upon it -- a phrase that, for many reasons, may be implicitly familiar to the player without perhaps the player consciously knowing exactly why due to the subtlety of its usage throughout the narrative of the game.¹⁴⁷ The player has, until this point, explored the underwater dystopia of Rapture in the year 1960, a city founded by Ryan upon the principles of Ayn Rand, fallen into apocalypse after a revolt, and populated by killers in the style of *The Road* who the player must defeat upon the orders of his or her mentor Atlas. Andrew Ryan reveals at the game's midpoint that the phrase 'Would you kindly' -- a phrase which has prefaced every instruction to the player throughout the game -- was a linguistic mind control trigger designed to compel the player to achieve the instruction-giver Atlas's will.

As I have showed throughout this chapter, not all games offer control over plot decisions, and although *Bioshock* offers several at various junctures, for the most part the player is given instructions over a radio and controls the avatar's physical movement and use of weapons in following these compulsory instructions. The player has up until this point most likely blindly followed the game's commands and objectives, accepting the narrative presented to them as transparent and predetermined with no other choice than to kill or to simply stop playing and halt further narrative progression. Here, Andrew Ryan himself uses the phrase 'Would you kindly' -- a phrase which ironically suggests choice on the part of the recipient -- to literally remove player autonomy. With this command, Ryan turns a game that has until this point largely told its story via kinesthetic incorporation and free player movement into a non-interactive cut-scene, claiming that 'a man chooses, and a slave obeys'. He commands the player, 'Sit, would you kindly? Stand, would you kindly? Run! Stop! Turn', with all of these played out in front of the player with Ryan asking the question, 'Was a man sent to kill, or a slave?' Ryan then hands the avatar a golf club and commands the player to kill him, apparently enacting Ryan's own philosophy that a man 'chooses' by deciding to end his life on his own terms.

¹⁴⁷ *Bioshock*, dir. by Ken Levine and Alyssa Finley (2K Games, 2007).

In a similar manner to Wayne Booth's concept of 'coduction' in literary criticism where prior readings of other genres and texts affect reader reception of new texts,¹⁴⁸ Miguel Sicart refers to the individual gamer's history as forming his or her expectations and appreciation of the ethics of various game titles – someone unfamiliar with shooting enemies might be shocked at mild violence, whilst someone who routinely accepts such objectives might give comparatively little thought to what he or she is doing.¹⁴⁹ This is a concept which this section will explore as operating within the text of *Bioshock* itself, with each encounter internally creating certain expectations of the world presented to the player. So too can novels be seen as encouraging various strategies or expectations in terms of what readers might wish to happen later in the narrative, as discussed throughout this chapter already in relation to *The Road*. So, for example, *The Road* many invite many readers to operate with video game-like strategies of allying with various focalisers and operating with patterns of expectation regarding survival, danger, and ethical goodness. Regardless of such strategies of reading, however, and regardless of how a reader's many idiosyncrasies might particularize a given reading experience, the reader cannot explicitly choose to alter any plot detail short of crossing out some text or writing a fanfiction, neither of which are likely to be sanctioned by any narrative inference as to a text's authority.

In games, the player is sometimes able to make explicit choices in determining the course of an unfolding diegesis, but as I will argue in my analysis of *Bioshock* and in the later chapters of this thesis, novel-like 'wish' choices are still crucial to the workings of game narratives. The ways in which the player might feel synonymous with their character on screen are crucial to an understanding of how video game narrative significance works in this regard. The majority of *Bioshock*'s gameplay involves murdering 'splicers', the citizens of the fallen city of Rapture who have become addicted to a powerful drug known as ADAM. This drug gives great power but also causes grotesque facial growths, inhuman movements, and insanity, leading its addicts to act as aggressors to the player and presenting him or her with a kill-or-be-killed choice to continue playing the game. Moreover, the characterizing details, faces, and dialogue for these splicers are repeated within a set number of splicer archetypes. The game trains the player to understand that it is acceptable to kill a splicer on the basis of how its narrative presentation works; if the player does so, he or she is not removing anything unique from the world, in comparison with the heavily characterized 'boss' individuals the player encounters at key moments. The splicers are spawned, infinite, largely non-individualised and reducible to repeated archetype – their personalities cannot truly 'die', as other splicers exactly like them can and will emerge again throughout the game no matter how many the player kills, something

¹⁴⁸ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 345.

¹⁴⁹ Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 118-20, passim.

further accentuated by their frequent usage of masks. As with the cannibals of the first half of *The Road*, they are narratively replaceable, and here quite literally so due to their infinite numbers.

Just as the player's inference as to the necessity of killing splicers is steadily increased with each encounter, so too does each encounter with various individualized, unique, irreplaceable, and heavily contextualized individuals at key 'boss encounters' throughout the game develop this logic that even individuals we are invited to view as 'real people' must necessarily be killed. These individuals are likewise lost to ADAM sickness and also present a kill-or-be-killed choice, with the exception of the penultimate character encountered before the climactic Andrew Ryan meeting -- Sander Cohen, a man the player does not have to kill at all and from whom the player is simply able to walk away. The player does not have to kill Sander Cohen, but many do so, and it is in situations such as this where players respond in apparently uninvited ways that significance can be found not just with regards to a discussion of novels versus video game control but also for the nature of characterisation itself. If games can give a certain kind of instruction repeatedly and then remove said instructions only for the player to continue to engage in that same behaviour, responses to games that occur in this manner represent strong instances of player-inferred authority and are ideal test-cases for exploring identification.

Cohen, a failed artist, uses the abilities granted to him by ADAM to petrify splicers and those he once knew into a still-life collection of statues, and asks the player to murder his three disciples and take photographs of their corpses using an in-game camera in order to complete a new artwork for him; in order to progress, the player must take part in the logic of his madness in order to leave and finally meet Andrew Ryan. Insomuch as the player is forced to follow the steps of another's thought, this could be considered to some extent an analogous case to novels where readers must temporarily adopt patterns of thought in inferring textual authority without choice in order to understand what an author is saying and then to decide whether they accept or reject the author's opinions, as in my analysis of misogyny in *The Unfortunates* in Chapter One. Here, after the player listens to Cohen's artistic claims and fulfils his artistic objectives in murdering the three disciples without choice, Cohen releases the player from his objectives and begins to walk away. The player can let him go without killing him. The game does not signal in any way that this is a moral choice open to the player, merely requiring one's restraint, departing from the game's usual obvious signposting of choice. Furthermore, if the player decides to kill Cohen, and then takes a photograph of him, then just as Cohen ordered the player to do to others, the game rewards the player by giving him or her the achievement badge 'Irony'. Neither Cohen's murder nor taking a photograph of Cohen's dead body represent actions that were ordered by the game, but many players perform these actions regardless,

emerging both from the logic of the preceding three boss characters and the artworks Cohen forced the player to produce, building up to Cohen's death in what might seem like revenge. This culmination represents Cohen's own madness infecting the player's character and the player's own sense of strategy.

Again, just as Johnson's misogynistic stereotyping in *The Unfortunates* is temporarily adopted by any reader who wishes to understand that text, and just as Zembla is made real by the readers of *Pale Fire* and the father's mistrust of others in *The Road* is adopted as a 'correct' strategy of reading that text's first half, video games are not unique in necessitating the temporary adoption of thought patterns in order for communication to take place. The difference here is in the system's direct feedback upon this possibility with the 'irony' achievement and the kinesthetic motions of performing violent murder, as although such incorporation can occur in novels as section two of this chapter showed, this is of a different location on a spectrum of immersive experiences. The game comments upon the irony of the player's action, revealing it to have been an expected course of action -- the player is provoked into following an inferred but unnecessary authority. The game's requirement for the player to take photographs locates the player as both observer and creator, 'passively' enacting what they believe the game's narrative to be whilst simultaneously bringing that narrative into being, eventually leading to this point where the player continues the game's logic even when it is not required for further narrative progression and foreshadowing for the game's revelation of its control via 'would you kindly'.

Bioshock makes its manipulation of the player overt in the Andrew Ryan encounter that follows the player's meeting with Sander Cohen. The player may have temporarily adopted the idea that his or her character wishes to kill Andrew Ryan in an acceptance of the avatar's apparent lack of resistance to Atlas's suggestions, a man who talks to the player's avatar as if the avatar shares his every wish. This emerges from a common trope of many first person shooters of the 'silent protagonist', a device used to help a sense of immersion and synonymy between player and avatar develop in many narrative-based first person shooters by having the player-character not actually speak throughout a game even in the middle of conversations with other characters. Here, however, this frequent trope is used to create a twist via the revelation of the player's silence as being due to mind control. The player *has* to kill Ryan due to the game's literal control of his or her character as part of a non-interactive cut-scene. On the diegetic level, the phrase 'would you kindly' has been controlling the protagonist's agency throughout the entire game. This revelation of the diegetic mind-control of the player's character by Atlas emerges as a bizarre kind of reframing, as on one level the player knows perfectly well that they had to obey Atlas's commands as otherwise it would be impossible to progress, but the player is likely to have accepted this as a genre convention of linear games. This defamiliarisation of an

accepted gameplay convention works in tandem with the diegetic revelation to critique the player's acceptance of narrative conventions in constructing characters. For example, the game begins with a photograph and recollection of the avatar's family, yet at the moment of his suicide, Ryan states that:

You think you have memories. A farm. A family. A crash. And then this place. Was there really a family? Did that airplane crash, or, was it hijacked? Forced down, forced down by something less than a man, something bred to sleepwalk through life unless activated by a simple phrase, spoken by their kindly master.

Frequently in games there is a strange tension between the avatar's personal history prior to the player's control versus the player's ability to make choices for reasons that might stem from extra-textual morality or aesthetic interest instead of that avatar's personal history. In Chapter Four of this thesis, I propose the term 'player causality' in order to explore the often bizarre ramifications of this tension for the resulting diegesis and ontology of fictional characters formed. In *Bioshock*, however, the possibility of this tension – the 'farm', 'family', 'crash' vaguely referred to prior to this point – is a trick. The avatar is hollow and void of such prior history, composed only of those actions the player has undertaken in addition to a biological identity as Ryan's *tabula rasa* amnesiac and mind-controlled son.

Many players do not want to kill Ryan at this point, a stance further invited by the visual rhetoric of the player's character visibly hesitating in the non-interactive cut-scene where Ryan commands the player to do so. In Ryan being killed by his own son, the motif of family persists throughout the entire *Bioshock* series and is crucial to any understanding of the game's processes. Likewise, Atlas, the player's guide through Rapture, asks the player to save his family and help them escape the city only for Andrew Ryan to apparently blow up their submarine right in front of the player, resulting in Atlas's grief and vow for revenge. Such devices trick the player into sympathy for Atlas, only to reveal that it was all just an illusion, that Atlas had no family on that submarine, and that the player's avatar had no family either. Upon realising the player's character is his son, Ryan says: 'now that I see you flesh-to-flesh and blood-to-blood I know I cannot raise my hand against you. But know this, you are my greatest disappointment.' Frank Fontaine, the player's controller and abuser, even reveals his own sense of attachment as your de facto adopted parent: 'I remember when me and the Kraut put you on that sub. You were no more than two. You were my ace in the hole. But you were also the closest thing I've ever had to a son. That's why this hurts, kid. Life isn't strictly business.' His death, as with Ryan's, is likewise linked to his nature as the player's apparent adopted father: 'I had you built! I sent you top-side! I called you back, showed you what you was, what you was capable of! Even that life you had. That was something I dreamed of and had

tattooed inside your head. [...] Now if you don't call that family, I don't know what is! And now...'

Frank Fontaine is interrupted by the arrival of a series of little girls who stop and finish him off, segueing into the final cut-scene. Throughout the game, the player is given the choice to kill or save these so-called 'Little Sisters' whenever they are encountered, and this choice forms the basis of much analysis of video games in general in the wider field of narrative studies.¹⁵⁰ These analyses focus on the player's choice over whether to kill or save these characters and the advantages this might bring in a gameplay sense of absorbing physical strength and quasi-magical ADAM powers from the fallen Sisters, with other narratively significant elements, such as 'Would you kindly' and Sander Cohen's ironic death often ignored just as these critics also often neglect the place of the Little Sisters within the game's motif of family. This chapter will argue that whilst these choices regarding the life and death of the Little Sisters are important, to be fully understood they must be explored within the context of the game's other concerns and this family narrative running throughout the first game, interrupting, as they do, Fontaine's claim that he does not know what family is other than the creation and manipulation of a human being. To kill or save the little sisters is a decision made significant by the game's narrative, not necessarily as much by the small gains in gameplay power that killing them might offer.

These 'Little Sisters', as the propagandists of Rapture named them, are little girls kidnapped from their families who have a unique tolerance for storing and generating ADAM within their stomachs, harvesting it from the corpses of fallen splicers, drinking it, and returning through vents to bring it back to a central supply. As they are frail little girls, brainwashed to see the dead bodies as 'angels', men are likewise brainwashed as their protectors and put into hulking diving suits to protect them from attackers. These are named 'Big Daddies'. On this issue, Atlas does not order the player to do anything, warning him or her that the children are not little girls anymore and that the player needs to kill the children to harvest their ADAM in order to help the avatar survive, whilst another voice, the regretful scientist who turned the little girls into what they are, pleads with the player to save them and restore their lost innocence.

Encounters with Big Daddies disrupt the normal processes of the game's combat. They are rarely encountered creatures of order, metal and strength who protect children against the disfigured, organic splicers who attack their charges. They move slowly, often holding the little girls' hands affectionately, and issue guttural noises resembling whale songs as their only means of communication. Unlike everyone else in the game, their only role is to protect against harm, and will not attack unless provoked by splicers or the player; otherwise, they lumber slowly

¹⁵⁰ See Sicart, pp. 158-61.

along and protect their ‘daughters’, who can be heard calling them ‘Mr B’ or ‘Mr Bubbles’. The little sisters themselves, if the Big Daddies are killed, begin to weep. The player is offered two options, each represented by a button hovering on screen above the action in an entirely different control scheme to the rest of the game – one button for harvesting, one for saving, and therefore emphasising the special nature of their choices.

If harvested, they are killed, their ADAM taken, with a marginally greater immediate benefit to the player in terms of power with accompanying ‘evil’ verbal and visual rhetoric, leading to a final cut-scene in the game where the player’s character leaves Rapture in command of the splicers to attack a nuclear submarine and take control of the world, making the sinister nature of the action clear according to the game’s interpretation of the player’s personality. If saved, angelic noises emerge and although the player is initially unaware that they will be rewarded, the player occasionally encounters teddy bears offering gifts at later points from the rescued little girls. At the end of the game, the player is shown all of them growing up, holding the avatar’s hand as children and as they grow older, through their wedding days to the avatar’s death bed. As the avatar dies of old age, the player is asked the rhetorical question of what his or her ‘reward’ was, with the speaker – the scientist who created the Little Sisters only to regret her decision -- claiming she knows the reward of the player for saving her charges: ‘a family’, the affiliation you never had throughout the game, but which the ‘good’ option seeks for the player to reclaim. The interim between the murder of Ryan and the final confrontation with Fontaine involves the player quite literally dressing as a Big Daddy in order to find their way to confront him, protecting a little sister en-route, allowing the player to fulfil this position before the conclusion. It is important to note that although these endings stem from player choices, their interpretation of the reasons behind the player’s choices might not necessarily be correct, and as mentioned, I explore the greater ramifications of games re-writing player intention in this manner as part of Chapter Four via the concept of ‘player causality’.

Bioshock 2 (2010) represents a logical progression and complication of *Bioshock*’s themes, but further manipulates the player’s sense of choice and responsibility by putting the player into the role of a Big Daddy who must rescue his Little Sister from her biological mother, the collectivist Sofia Lamb, who has assumed power in the city following the deaths of Ryan and Fontaine.¹⁵¹ Lamb wishes to unify the surviving splicers of Rapture as a group she calls ‘the Rapture Family’. Eleanor (Lamb’s daughter and the player’s former Little Sister) is to become what her mother calls ‘the People’s Daughter’, heralding the rebirth of the city via the transfer of all individual consciousness into Eleanor’s mind via ADAM. The only obstacle to this utopia is Eleanor’s lingering affection for her Big Daddy, the pair-bond implanted within the player’s

¹⁵¹ *Bioshock 2*, dir. by Jordan Thomas (2K Games, 2010).

avatar compelling the player to save her and acting in place of the mind control ‘would you kindly’ narrative contextualisation of player action from the first *Bioshock* game. Sofia Lamb repeatedly reminds the player that as a Big Daddy, his or her avatar’s adopted familial relation is fake and controlled, that the avatar is a monster, much like the Ryan-Fontaine dynamic as ‘parent’ figures in the original *Bioshock*, but with the player as a nobler version of this counterfeit parent figure and Lamb as the genetic parent who had her child stolen from her.

The most interesting distinction between the procedural rhetoric of the two games emerges when the player finally confronts the first boss of *Bioshock 2*, Grace Holloway, after hours of tapes and narrative build her character, just as they helped to construct the bosses of the original game. Holloway is revealed to have been Eleanor’s carer only for the little girl to have been kidnapped and turned into the player’s Little Sister many years ago; at the moment of confrontation in the present day, Holloway states her belief that trying to stop the player’s advancement was an ethically correct course of action, proceeds to call the player a monster, and does not try to defend herself against what she views as the player’s inevitable attack – however, as with the Sander Cohen choice in the original game, the player can just leave her alone by walking away and displaying restraint. If the player does so, Holloway begins to re-evaluate her faith in what Sofia Lamb has been saying about him or her, and tries to aid the player’s mission by sending his or her avatar some supplies. The majority of boss encounters in *Bioshock 2* follow this logic, of allowing the player to walk away and leave the individualised boss character alive. The narrative irreplaceability of such characters in comparison with the endless splicer enemies of the game does not necessarily necessitate allegiance, however, so much as infuses their presence with narrative significance and additional affective weight to gameplay choices relating to such characters. *The Road* and *We Are What We Are* invite sympathy for protagonists that is perhaps almost impossible without a sense of narrative irreplaceability; however, although understanding the humanity and motivations of a human being often invites empathy, we can just as easily imagine such understanding of another’s thoughts as leading to hatred and condemnation.

A feeling of hatred in response to a particularised character can be demonstrated via the second boss encounter of *Bioshock 2* and the character of Stanley Poole, using my own personal experience of playing this game as an example of narrative empathy leading to a negative, murderous reaction. I aided Poole throughout an area of the game only to gradually discover his role in my brainwashing as a Big Daddy, in Eleanor’s kidnap from Holloway, and the mass murder of those who trusted him in order to cover up these actions. As he cowered beneath me, I wanted to kill him for what he had done to Eleanor, to the people he trusted, and to me (or the personalised background of the avatar erased prior to the player taking control via the

conversion therapy to become a 'Big Daddy'). This feeling of wanting to murder the defenceless Poole was quite strong and contradicted the normally 'ethical' way I often try to play games as an aesthetic posture, feeling 'evil' options often to be quite facile; in turn my playing of the game in a manner contrary to my initial aesthetic intentions suggests a degree of emotional acceptance of this world that outweighed my extra-textual reasons for playing. Eventually I withdrew, deciding he was not worth it, that his guilt was in the past, and that if I remained any longer I would just shoot him. This tendency of some players to carry out decisions to create enjoyable or interesting narrative outcomes rather than necessary engaging in ethical behaviour in the way they might in real life must be noted here for its centrality to my initial impulse to play the game for a 'good' as opposed to 'bad' play-through, in an 'aesthetic' motivation for decision-making in accordance with how an enjoyable or interesting story might be judged; here, however, my experience of narrative empathy and affective engagement with the character of Poole led me to oscillate between wanting to murder him and wanting to let him go in a battle of narrative and ethical priorities.

By now accustomed to this level of choice in *Bioshock 2*, the third encounter with Gilbert Alexander shook my reasoning further regarding good and evil aesthetic outcomes. The player discovers that Alexander is the inventor of the pair bond between Little Sisters and Big Daddies, and was to become the first 'utopian', the prototype of what is intended for Eleanor but who instead became a failed, insane brain in a vat. Alexander's tapes addressed me directly, his past 'rational' self asking me to kill the insane creature he had now most likely become as an act of mercy. I eventually decided to do so, out of respect for the man Alexander once was but was no longer; in so doing, I realised my agreement with the reasoning behind many arguments regarding euthanasia. This situation demonstrates how a broad fictional analogue to real life political issues can provoke ethical introspection in a manner apparently removed from the normal framing of such decisions but which can provoke both reflection and change in the player who faces them.

However, few of the player's decisions in this regard appear to have lasting or overt ethical impact throughout much of the rest of the game. Without reactivity from the system as to player choices, players might in some senses feel more free to act in an aesthetic or ethical sense without regard for gameplay consequences such as losing abilities or cutting off storyline options for choices (a player might choose to side with a certain faction in a game, for example, not because the player agrees with that faction's aims but because failure to do so might lock off and exclude an interesting portion of narrative to be experienced). The lack of such reactivity harkens back to Žižek's earlier argument regarding the true selves of players potentially emerging in the freedom to act without consequence in the fictionally protected space of video

games; however, I would argue that fictionality itself does not ‘free’ the player as the player might be concerned over storyline ramifications of actions – a factor Žižek is not likely to have considered due to the hyper-masculine caricature of gaming he presents. By not showing consequences for actions, games can conversely encourage players to act with less restraint and to do what they would ‘really’ like to do in the fictional space, whether such actions involve experimentation with game mechanics or treating another character a certain way. Here in *Bioshock 2*, such a lack of ramifications is false and merely a delay, however. The twist occurs when the player finally meets Eleanor, the avatar’s adopted daughter and Little Sister. She idolizes the player as her father, quite literally; she has been watching every decision the player has made throughout the entire game, and bases her morality upon the player’s example. The player sees this quite literally in a vision of the Little Sisters’ conditioning to view Big Daddies as moral and loving protectors, playing as one of the little girls in a world of light and marble instead of the darkness the player knows to be the true nature of the game’s world, of elegant dancers instead of splicers, of angels instead of dead men. The player sees depictions of his or her decisions memorialized as art work, with Eleanor agreeing with the player’s choices no matter what those choices were.

The original *Bioshock* made assumptions about the player’s moral agency in its endings, with the player presented as an evil nuclear conqueror or an adoptive father even if he or she had more nuanced motivations than to save or harvest, a blunt procedural rhetoric in itself. By hiding the immediate ethical outcome, *Bioshock 2* creates a kind of negative space characterisation for the player to identify with in the form of Eleanor’s ethical view the player. Depending on the ratio of sacrifices or benevolent acts throughout the game, the player will have created a monster in the figure of Eleanor, who might sacrifice her sisters, prevent her mother’s survival, and pursue power and greed, distinguishing between whether the player saved the ‘innocent’ or ‘offered no mercy’ to the guilty individuals who led to her fate. Or the player might have raised a benevolent young woman who saves her little Sisters and her mother, proclaiming that the player’s avatar will live on in her, that the bond between her character and the player is synonymous with utopia and that ‘evil is just a word. Under the skin, it’s simple pain. For you, mercy was victory. You sacrificed, you endured, and when given the chance, you forgave.’ If the player’s actions were confused, a mixture of harvesting little sisters and forgiving the individuals he or she encountered throughout the game, the ending is ambiguous and sad: ‘You taught me that right and wrong were tidal forces, ever shifting. To survive in Rapture, Father, you took what you needed from the innocent. But... when the guilty posed no threat, you simply walked away.’ In such an ambiguous ending, players can even seek to correct the daughter’s interpretation of their actions by sacrificing themselves and refusing to remain as

her father and moral guardian, leading Eleanor to remark on her loneliness, of how the player ‘chose to die rather than have me follow you’, wondering ‘if even I could be redeemed’.

The player might have conceived of himself or herself, for example, as acting in Eleanor’s interests by harming those who sought to harm her, acting with unforeseen consequences upon Eleanor’s own moral agency and tragically perpetuating the cycle of violence, as I considered doing with the Stanley Poole example earlier in this analysis. If the player chooses to live, Eleanor extracts the player’s mind calmly in the midst of a thunderstorm (recalling the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ visual rhetoric of the little sister choices throughout the game), saying ‘You may not have wanted me father, but you defined me. You chose to survive, no matter what the cost.’ In the very worst ending, this extraction of the player’s mind will be forced, with the avatar shown visibly resisting Eleanor’s attempt. To further link actions with consequences, the colour scheme and imagery related to the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ endings for this game echo almost exactly the colour schemes associated with how little sisters view the world via their brainwashing and how the player views the devastation of Rapture throughout the game.

In *Bioshock 2*, the ethical player must act as a good man so that *another* might develop their ethical agency along similar lines. The player becomes a father, identified with this role from the beginning with all it implies, including not just physical but moral protection through intimacy, rather than the grand, impersonal systems of Randian philosophy as with Andrew Ryan, or Collectivist philosophy of the nation as an all-encompassing family with Sofia Lamb. However, there are those who cannot earn the player’s forgiveness due to the demands of first person shooter systems and the narrative replaceability of the horde of splicers. The retreat to fatherhood in a series about the failure of grand totalising political systems on both the political right and left is not without its own political dimension, with the exclusion of those outside the family as threats to the objects of our intimacy; as George Lakoff highlights, governments on both the political right and left have often been framed as ‘strict fathers’ and ‘nurturing parents’.¹⁵² Indeed, the characters of the *Bioshock* series can be seen as potentially embodying both fascistic qualities (the Big Daddy defending against grotesque splicers) and leftist qualities (such as withholding the death penalty with regard to punishing individuals).

In embodying both fascistic and leftist qualities, *Bioshock* calls into question the way in which both positions can at best ignore and at worst actively rob the homogenous masses of their individuality; in *Bioshock*, individuality is not afforded to these decadent splicers and thus the player is exempted from the guilt of substantial empathy in contrast to that which players might

¹⁵² George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 65-142.

be invited to feel towards individualised characters. The enemies of the *Bioshock* series are monsters without identity, utterly replicable by the game's programming in a system which, intentionally or unintentionally on the part of the developers, echoes the social status of these enemies in the diegesis. The inequalities in Rapture society that led Fontaine to pose as the worker hero Atlas and Lamb to manipulate the Pauper's Drop slum in *Bioshock 2* is given some airing, yet ultimately the poor become unthinking servants of these causes; regrettable, perhaps, that they became this way through what is presented as partially their own fault, but the splicers are virtually irredeemable otherwise, unlike those who abstained from ADAM or the Little Sisters, to whom the player acts as a Father, literally removing ADAM from their bodies). ADAM is in the end partially a metaphor for drug use, rendering the grotesque faces of the splicers emblematic of the ravages of drug addiction, and the Big Daddies protectors who punish those hordes involved in such social depravity. Encoded within the system of the game, therefore, is a political logic every bit as rigid and problematic as those the game attacks, and even the retreat of the individuals from depraved society into the apparently free and affective family unit is inherently political.

Therefore, player construction of non-playable characters is very important to the *Bioshock* series' overall effects. Moreover, beyond the medium specificity of how player choice can explicitly alter the diegesis of these games, the way such control interacts with secondary characters who are ontologically 'lesser' and replaceable compared to the protagonists highlights how player bias and emotional engagement with a text can affect player/reader construction of fictional characters even in novels. Brewer claims that there is a cognitive bias towards processing newly encountered individuals as quickly as possible according to pre-existing categories and stereotypes; only later will most people begin to decategorize and individuate the newly encountered person, unless something about the initial interaction promotes personalisation from the very beginning. In this framework, those characters developed by a narrative to be significant and individuated – to be narratively irreplaceable and unique to some extent – invite emotional responses in a similar manner to the way in which humans act in real life. In these texts discussed so far in this chapter, the depiction of family units – whether the father and son of *The Road* or those surrounding the Big Daddy/Little Sister relationship in the *Bioshock* series – invites a sense of narrative irreplaceability and allegiance while the poor, faceless, dehumanised, and homeless masses of both texts invite immediate murderous inclinations on the part of readers and players. Conversely, the protagonists of *The Road* invite narrative allegiance due to their emotionally engaging and omnipresent struggle, just as the repeated presence of the avatar in the *Bioshock* games (coupled with medium specific kinaesthetic control) is likely to invite allegiance with that character. However, the family relationship in fiction is even capable of rendering the kind of cannibalism and destructive

tendencies of these enemy figures into an object for narrative empathy, as shown in *We Are What We Are*. Readers, viewers, and players do not have to like all narratively irreplaceable individuals, however – my optional murders of the ironic Sander Cohen and Stanley Poole demonstrate this – but these deaths matter far more than that of, say, the two hundred and seventy-fifth random man with a gun to fire at the player only to be met with execution. Such characters are ontologically lesser than the protagonists, and this difference is key to reader/player allegiance and emotional engagement.

This chapter began with an analysis of how video games control systems are more complex than many theorists describe in their frequent use of different types of control schemes for different situations. I first analysed in this framework the sequence of the non-choice based novel *The Road* and its ability to manipulate the narrative empathy of readers with comparative reference to the video game *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and the film *We Are What We Are*; I followed this with an analysis of the choice-based video game series *Bioshock* and its use of the games medium to make arguments about free will, obeying authority, and the responsibility of family. We can conclude not only that 'control' is an inherently unstable category in video games, but also that it is present in a metaphorical form in the reading of novels. Sequences not only suggest a certain logic or authority to be followed but necessitate inference; coupled with emotional engagement, inference as to what *might* happen will often transform into a conviction regarding what *should* happen next, a wish for certain narrative events to occur. Although video games allow players to take these wishes and influence diegetic events to enact them, choice is never constant and always partial and prescribed, in many senses taunting the player far more than the comfortable novel-reader who never had any such expectation of being able to change events. It is this tension created by being able to have some control but not complete control in video games that will provide much of my theorisation of one of my key new concepts, 'player/reader causality', in Chapter Four. In the next chapter, Chapter Three, I build towards this point through an analysis of an oft-overlooked aspect of characterisation – the presence of multiple characters in almost all novels and games -- that likewise has further implications for video games studies even as the analysis of games helps clarify my theories regarding novels once more. An examination of such multiplicity can help us further define these concepts of control and authority that contribute to the overall action of identification.

Moreover, throughout my thesis I have explored dynamics where characters in each text are constructed in a different way to others. In the *Bioshock* series, for example, splicers are ontologically lesser than other characters not only for their unlimited spawning as enemies with a frequently identical set of faces and voices, but also because they are given a far more restricted emotional range of complex characterising detail than the comparatively irreplaceable 'boss' enemies or allies. In many narratives, however, we do not need to go so far as science

fiction or dystopia to find ontologically lesser characters. As I will explore in the next chapter, such a role is often imposed upon female fictional characters.

CHAPTER THREE: Multiplicity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, *Bioshock Infinite*, and Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*

1. Introduction

All characters are not created or constructed equally in the minds of readers; this is not just in a sense where some characters are given less space or text relating to them and therefore do not have as many characterising details as others as with Woloch's theory of 'character-space', but in the choice of detail and the kind of fabric with which each one is woven. Therefore Gradus in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is formed as a 'half-man' that the reader might view as lacking human emotions quite precisely because he *does* lack human emotions; such details are excluded compared to how other characters such as Kinbote and Shade are presented. Likewise, even when some characters only briefly appear, the selection of detail associated with each character can have a great impact upon a given narrative, particularly in terms of how they are placed within a sequence; for example, as explored briefly in the previous chapter of this dissertation in relation to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the old man who appears half-way through the narrative is written in a simplified and comedic manner, eliciting similarly comedic and simplified responses from the novel's protagonists in a parody of their prior behaviour throughout the novel.

Before they encounter this old man in *The Road*, the father rightly fears other individuals within this world as enemies; afterwards, the father's fearful behaviour repeatedly leads to crimes against other survivors in the novel's world who represent lesser threats or even no threat at all to the pair. The brief appearance of the old man invites a different kind of character construction to the previous encounters, relying upon caricature and a comedy of misunderstanding. These selective details allow *The Road* to hide the seams of an incoherent argument – one half of which suggests all should be feared, the other half of which suggests others should be given the benefit of the doubt. The old man's appearance represents the introduction of a third character to be constructed and understood as an example of a human being within the narrative, yet as a human utterly distinct from the inhuman cannibals encountered up until this point, capable of cooperation whilst representing no harm. Likewise, the characterisation of the father and the son at this point slightly alters to echo the emotional palate of the old man as a simplified and caricatured figure, presenting caricatures of their own prior behaviour and making their earlier fear seem melodramatic. In the process, the novel's way of defining success in this world becomes aligned more with the boy's wish to trust others than the father's fearful harming of others.

As this encounter in *The Road* demonstrates, the introduction or removal of additional characters at various points in a narrative sequence can affect reader construction and identification with other characters. This mediation between multiple characters occurs to some degree within any text, whether the sequencing and manipulation of these interactions is subtle or overt. If macro-level events and micro-level style in a sequence are instrumental to the processes involved in reader construction of characters from details throughout a given text, then such realities as alternating between characters, manipulation of discourse time, exclusion of detail, varying spaces devoted to each character, and so on are integral to understanding how narrative sequences work to produce characterisation -- this is not to mention the role of narrators and focalisers as mediators of other characters creating further dimensions to these processes.

In novels where a personified narrator is present, a reader might get a sense of character at the same time as an underlying inferred authority (what we feel a text sanctions in terms of interpretation) that may support or undermine overt narration. This situation becomes more complex when a homodiegetic narrator encounters another character in the narrative. Any such encounter is likely to involve the narrator interpreting and parsing the being of another individual – selecting bodily detail, physical actions, direct or indirect speech, and even guesses as to what the individual might be thinking or feeling and presenting them to the reader. Even with such narrators we can still experience comparatively ‘unmediated’ characters via direct speech, yet here there is a doubling effect. Readers can use direct speech to directly gain access to a character without mediating narration, although even this is impure as the homodiegetic narrator will have ‘chosen’ to allow direct as opposed to indirect speech at a given narrative moment. Therefore direct speech might not only allow a reader to gain direct access to a given character’s own storytelling but, as emerging from a larger frame narrative dominated by the narrator’s thoughts, might lead to the reader also considering how the narrator might feel about this character even if no explicit statements to this effect are present. These processes might therefore inflect reader responses to both this secondary character and narrator – to represent this diagrammatically, the process reader → narrator → character occurs at the same time as reader → character → narrator.

It is a fallacy to assume that readers just identify with one individual character in a text such as the protagonist, focalised character, or even a narrator. Focalisation is never stable or constant, as alternative perspectives always seep through if there is more than one character in a text; each character becomes a lightning rod for the role-playing activity of identification and narrative empathy, even if readers feel strong or overwhelming allegiance for a particular character for

the most part. Readers have to construct characters to make sense of a text, and to make sense of characters, readers have to use the characterising details within a text to generate a working mental image of what the particular individual is like. To analogise the performance of a reader in this regard to theatrical texts, the reader represents a theatre and theatrical troupe all combined for the enacting of a text, having to generate and perform each individual character to varying degrees. Identification is sometimes used to suggest ‘being’ a single character within a text almost as if that character is a video game-style avatar as much as it is used to denote a feeling of being *like* a character in a text due to some kind of similarity between the history of a character and one’s own real-life history. Such similarity between a character and a reader would need to be negotiated on an ongoing basis subject to revision as a text develops and would not be instantaneously possible in any narrative as details promoting such similarity could only emerge in a sequence rather than all at once. Therefore, we could instead say that readers engage in attempts to construct and understand *all* characters in a given text although some may emerge as prime candidates for this prized allegiance or ‘avatar’ style position of being the one the reader ‘identifies with’.

Laura Mulvey’s theory regarding what she terms ‘the male gaze’ in her famous essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) can assist here not only in understanding why readers of prose novels and players of video games identify ‘with’ certain characters as opposed to others but also in highlighting the ongoing and often unconscious nature of the necessary mediation of a reader, viewer, or player in response to the presence of multiple characters in a narrative.¹⁵³ Mulvey explores how ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (the stylisation and coding of female characters in such a way as to encourage heterosexual cis men to find them attractive) operates in conjunction with what she views as a crucial distinguishing feature of the film genre – the camera’s control of the viewer’s perspective.¹⁵⁴ Mulvey explores how female characters in film are often used as motivating forces for both the hypothetically heterosexual male audience and also the male characters on screen, concluding that these heterosexual cis male protagonists invite identification as avatars for the viewer not just through focalisation methods such as an alignment of camera gaze and presence throughout the story but also due to their ability to control events in the narrative.¹⁵⁵

For Mulvey, the formula is powerful – the viewer does not just gaze at the screen and the events of a plot through the eyes and mind of the protagonist, but also forms a simultaneous direct

¹⁵³ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, rev. 2006), pp. 342-352

¹⁵⁴ Mulvey, p. 346.

¹⁵⁵ Mulvey, p. 347.

relationship with these events and characters separate to that of the protagonist.¹⁵⁶ The viewer might therefore wish to assert control over events due to the passivity of the medium, but cannot; the protagonist, as someone with such control over events, therefore becomes a focal point for identification as an avatar that can act on the viewer's behalf, with the camera and sense of fictional illusion facilitating these processes. In the framework of my own thesis, Mulvey's ideas hold a huge amount of interest for theorisation about character construction and identification beyond the arenas of film or feminist theory, particularly with regards to procedural rhetoric and video games. For example, Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric (the way in which video games can lead players through an argument by encouraging players themselves to feel like they have generated that argument through learning rules and completing procedures) can be applied to prose novels and other traditionally-sequenced texts where although readers are unlikely to feel they are in control they can still be seen to have generated arguments emerging from the sequence of texts through their sense-making inferences. Mulvey's suggestion that a viewer's wish to control narrative events is key to a viewer's feeling of allegiance with a particular character not only neatly explains reader investment in these processes but is also quite suggestive in relation to my ongoing comparison between novels and video games.

This chapter will explore the operation of the male gaze and reader/player negotiation of multiple characters in two texts explored in the previous chapter of this thesis, *The Road* and *Bioshock*. I will develop my observations of these texts to apply them to another novel in a very different genre setting to the post-apocalyptic -- Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* -- which presents similar manipulations to *The Road* yet with gender even more clearly aligned to problems with identification and with temporary shifts in narration at key points. Through all of this analysis I further the conclusions of my previous chapters regarding the effect of sequence in identification alongside the coherency of arguments and effects generated by such narratives, extending all of these with greater concentration upon the complicating factors of reader/player mediation between multiple characters and the role of gender in these processes. This analysis will lead into the final chapter of my thesis, exploring all of these concepts and issues emerging from previous chapters in relation to the question of what I term reader and player causality.

2. The Abjection of the Mother versus the Heroism of the Father in *The Road*

In Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic *The Road*, the main female character of the novel -- the mother of the boy and the wife of the father -- abandons both figures before the narrative begins,

¹⁵⁶ Mulvey, p. 348.

recounted in the father's memories as an abject and lost figure. As I explored in Chapter Two, the novel's arguments shift from the first half presenting a terrible world where all must be feared to a second half where even dangerous strangers might perhaps be worthy of some empathy; against this backdrop, the mother's role in the novel is brief and prefaces the majority of this material. The mother destabilises the logic of the father's heroic narrative before it even fully begins by proclaiming they would be better off killing themselves. However, this destabilisation of the pair's values will not necessarily continue through the reader's progression through the narrative as seen in the reams of reviews deeming *The Road* to be capable of 'saving the world'. In this section, I will argue that the mother's arguments are likely to fail due to the ontological construction of her character as comprised of esoteric sexualised arguments compared to the complex and more traditionally heroic emotional associations that comprise the male protagonists.

As discussed, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze suggests that, due to emotional investment leading viewers to want to exercise control over narratives, as the viewer is unable to have such control in films then he or she will be likely to select the perspective of a protagonist who seems to be able to exercise control in a meaningful way over the film's events; usually these are heterosexual cis men, with women often restricted to the role of object. With regard to the novel *The Road*, the mother is not exactly subject to the male gaze in the same way as a love interest in a film. Rather, the novel's characterisation of the mother subverts and exaggerates features traditionally associated with a love interest in the male gaze to nightmarish extremes through the association of sexualised features with a nihilistic world view. Moreover, as with Mulvey's standard framework for the male gaze, the father is the kind of character able to exert control over narrative events in the way the reader might wish to and the father therefore invites allegiance because of this. The mother on the other hand problematizes the male gaze here as she represents an even greater level of control over events than the father possesses through her wish to actively commit suicide rather than endure for no good reason. At the same time, however, the mother is unlikely to invite allegiance even though she has control over narrative events because her aim is likely to be quite different to that of the reader's wishes, as if they all committed suicide there would be no cathartic and heroic narrative to continue reading.

The mother's characterisation interacts with and works against the father's characterisation on a stylistic as well as a conceptual level. There is little overt delineation between direct speech, thought, and description in *The Road*, all blended instead into a focalization we might predominantly associate with the father even up until and after his death, having been explicitly internalized within the boy's mind albeit with increasing destabilisation in the second half of the narrative as the father's judgements begin to be undermined by events. Through all of this there

are frequent register shifts between highly poeticized – ‘some sad and solitary changeling’ (p. 81) – and more precise stichomythic language – ‘the boy didnt answer, ‘you have to talk to me’, ‘okay’ (p. 80) – in what John Cant has observed as McCarthy’s ‘double style’, where ‘sparse descriptions tend to lead up to final passages that are linguistically and philosophically ambitious’, moving readers towards opportunities ‘to reflect’ and, perhaps, shifting from focalizing the father to an implied author figure.¹⁵⁷ However, it might just as easily be posited that the father’s moments of poeticized focalization are representational rather than direct depictions of his thoughts, echoing his wish to carry the fire of civilisation against the entropy and sadness of this world from which his concentration on physical action emerges in his sparse prose elsewhere. Indeed, as Cant writes, the virtuous elaboration of well-performed physical action serves to ‘divert the reader’s mind from the anxiety generated through identification with the protagonists in the extremity of their plight, just as it diverts the minds of the characters themselves in practical activity’.¹⁵⁸

The reader becomes acclimatized to this manoeuvring between different kinds of relating to the character of the father, but where thought is stylized and where action and direct speech are for the most part restrained. It is highly significant therefore that in her only dialogue in the novel immediately prior to her suicide, the mother speaks in the same poetic register as the stylized focalization of the father’s thoughts, with an extended metaphor of an affair with death in a nihilistic and sexualised manner – a sexualisation only really associated with women throughout the narrative: ‘I dont care. It’s meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken on a new lover. He can give me what you cannot’ (p. 58). She claims that she does not ‘dream at all’, ‘because I am done with my own whorish heart’ (p. 59). Her only expressed belief is found in her choice to commit suicide, replacing the life offered to her with the father and son (and therefore her continued existence in this heroic narrative) with the meaning she finds in death personified as an adulterous lover. Two implications emerge from this: the apparent problem of the mother’s gender as a character for this novel, and why this problematic gendering utilizes the same register shifts as have been associated with the father’s focalization up to this point in the text. Who willingly refers to herself as a ‘whore’ when about to commit suicide when no-one has even mentioned sex in that frame of reference? Why is the mother abjected in this sexualised way, and what does her abjection, couched in the register of the father’s inner thoughts, do to the reader’s identification with the father?

¹⁵⁷ John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 267.

¹⁵⁸ Cant, p. 275.

In comments echoing those reviewers made regarding B.S. Johnson's treatment of women as I explored in Chapter 1, one reviewer of *The Road* comments on the mother's 'whorish heart', 'Her long and windy speech, which seems torn from another reality, is perhaps the only discordant note in an otherwise flawless novel. McCarthy has never done women well'.¹⁵⁹ This judgement is notably evaluative, perhaps even morally so: the wife does not register as someone capable of inviting narrative empathy in the same way that the father might, her emotions and her manner of expressing her emotions sexualized to the point of abjection. The claim of a 'discordant note' here is useful as a metaphor for the mother's place in the reader's negotiation between these multiple characters. The mother's sexualisation and refusal to play by the rules of the heroic father's survival works as a foil to his characterisation, potentially destabilising the workings of the novel in a way that the reader is likely to reject due to the mother's abject opposition to the narrative exercise the reader becomes invested in by reading the novel. To compare to the television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), the viewer is conditioned to value and forgive the methamphetamine cook Walter White despite the fact that he murders people and does not care about the lives he has ruined, because the programme rarely shows the victims of his drug in great detail outside of Jesse Pinkman (who escapes many of the symptoms such as rotting teeth).¹⁶⁰ Walter White only truly invites the viewer's ire after five seasons, the betrayal of Jesse, the attempted murder of a child, and the death of his brother-in-law Hank. Walter White's wife Skyler however was an unpopular character amongst viewers since the very first season, purely because she stands up to Walter, acts as a narrative foil for his activities, reacts with suspicion and is upset at his emotional distance and lies, and eventually wants him to stop producing drugs when she finds out. None of these opinions or responses are unwarranted or unrealistic, but they work against the dominant exciting factor of the narrative – Walter White's involvement in the drug industry – and due perhaps also to Skyler's status as a woman, these opinions were rejected by reading her character as a 'shrieking, hypocritical harpy'.¹⁶¹

The mother in *The Road* opposes the father's self-justifying logic in a similar way to Skyler's actions in *Breaking Bad*, and this might be enough to earn the mother the ire of any reader who feels allegiance to the father regardless of the validity of the mother's points. Similarly, it must also be noted that the novel presents all characterising details regarding the mother strictly through the father's focalisation and therefore the reader has no access to her character other than that which the father provides. How can the mother be a hero when all the father seems to dwell upon is her sexualised nature and nihilistic end? These elements are combined in a dream:

¹⁵⁹ Jennifer Reese, 'The Road', *Entertainment Weekly*, 27 September 2006
<<http://www.ew.com/article/2006/09/27/road>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

¹⁶⁰ *Breaking Bad*, created by Vince Gilligan (Sony Pictures Television, 2008-13).

¹⁶¹ Anna Gunn, 'I Have a Character Issue', 23 August 2013, *The New York Times*
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/opinion/i-have-a-character-issue.html?smid=tw-share&_r=1&> [accessed 1 September 2015].

‘in his dreams his pale bride came to him’, her ‘rib bones painted white’, ‘a smile, her downturned eyes’ (p. 17), culminating in physical interaction in his daydreams after he awakes: ‘she held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned’ (p. 18). Although it would be valid to critique McCarthy himself for his depiction of women – with the writer himself holding the belief that he is not ‘competent enough’ to write about women well –¹⁶² it is perhaps, as with film, more interesting here to explore how the reader’s own action generates some level of responsibility for the male gaze. Why, for example, might readers not judge the father himself for his potential lack of emotional support for the mother leading up to her suicide and his later sexualisation of her death-wish?

The reader is unlikely to interpret the mother’s sequences as highly biased in memory, or to judge the father himself for his lack of emotional support, not only because there is no way of knowing how accurate the father’s rendition of the mother is at this point but also because much of the power of *The Road* arguably lies in the emotional tension between the protagonists’ ‘carrying the fire’ of life and goodness versus the possibility that their efforts will be futile. If the reader is to emotionally invest in the father’s attempt to control this journey, such a radical critique as that suggested by the mother’s suicide stands little chance against the father’s simultaneous ruthlessness against cannibals and kindness towards the boy. As long as the father engages in these acts, he proves the mother emotionally incorrect to the reader, however logically valid her arguments are. For example, the mother critiques the hidden assumptions behind the father’s self-construction and his attempt to impose his model of thinking upon her. Their conversation begins in this manner:

We’re survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.
Survivors? she said.
Yes.
What in God’s name are you talking about? We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film. (p. 57)

The father expresses what we might take as a fact – that they are ‘survivors’ as they are still alive – only for the mother to reject and replace it with an explicitly aesthetic and pop-cultural alternative, ‘We’re the walking dead in a horror film.’ By extracting this pop-cultural sense as an opposite to ‘survivors’, the wife glosses the father’s phrase as itself a similarly cultural notion in the same vein as ‘good guys’ – the hidden assumption in his use of the term becomes that these characters will continue to survive, that along the usual narratives found in this genre

¹⁶² John Jurgensen, ‘Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2009 <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

they themselves might metafictionally expect to remain alive, even that they therefore fill the same generic reader expectation of ‘goodness’ as opposed to their enemies and the cannibals.

The wife expresses her ‘survivor’ status as stemming from her passive construction as a character by the father, ‘I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I’m done’ (p. 57) – as, indeed, stemming from the sort of invasive identification of the kind various post-colonial and feminist critics have warned against, who deemed such a process to be ‘a ruthless displacement and absorption of the other’,¹⁶³ where identifiers are often ‘roused to action and full subjectivity by the spectacle of female suffering’.¹⁶⁴ She similarly interrogates and reverses the father’s ethical claims so that his apparent pragmatism is read as a hidden passivity whilst her own suicidal choice is recovered as an active ethical decision, switching to a more direct and less poetic mode of speech: ‘Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant’ (p. 58). This statement expresses belief in a different kind of ‘finding’ to that the father proclaims at the end of the novel, ‘Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again’ (p.300), stressing instead a nameless alterity, ‘they’, and a sexualized death. The wife is potentially wrong after the fact; the father dies of illness, whilst the son is last seen entering the company of a new ‘good’ family who allow the boy to keep his gun and who have women and children with them, or so many readers might think.

However, as I explored in Chapter Two, any reader who forms the idea that the son will survive in the protection of this ‘good’ family at the novel’s end is inferring the suggestion emerging from the argumentative shifts of the second half of the novel where the reader is trained to afford trust to strangers; if such a ‘good’ family had appeared in the novel’s first half, the reader may instead have interpreted the strangers as threatening. When reading the narrative for the first time, especially in light of McCarthy’s bleak corpus and the heightened apocalyptic threat of this novel, the wife’s version of the future seems plausible, even likely. The mother claims they do not talk about death anymore ‘because it’s here. There’s nothing left to talk about’ only for the father to respond ‘I wouldnt leave you’ (p. 58). Just as the mother did earlier with her claim that they were in a horror film, the father responds to a perceived implication of her suicide – ‘I wouldn’t leave you’ – appealing to yet another invasive identification of how *he* would ethically act if he were her and thereby suggesting that the situation is more about him than it is about her. The father’s appeal suggests, rather, that the mother is not engaging in an

¹⁶³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 236.

¹⁶⁴ Nancy Roberts, *Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification Through the Novel* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), p. 25.

autonomous action in committing suicide, but is betraying him. The mother in turn glosses this 'betrayal' as sexual, using the sexual as a metonym for the nature of the father's affective tie: 'I dont care. It's meaningless. You can think of me as faithless if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot' (p. 58). This gloss is as much a description of the father's latent meaning as it is a suggestion – 'you can think' – that the father aestheticize her as a way of dealing with her abjection and as a logical continuation of his own thought processes to this point.

Again, however, even if all of the mother's critiques of the father's logic can be understood as intellectually plausible, the reader's emotional allegiance with the father and son's struggle to survive up until this point may nevertheless trump her explanations. There is a likely danger here of misogynist response due to her apparent abandonment of her position as a mother, and she raises this gendered possibility herself in her explanation of her act:

I cant do it alone.

Then dont. I cant help you. They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I dont dream at all. You say you cant? Then dont do it. That's all. Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. (p. 59)

Gender and familial roles are considered to be acts of imagination in this formula, socially constructed by 'the[m]'. The mother rejects her gender role by rejecting the symbolic system: 'I don't dream at all', by rejecting the validity of the creative act, as she has done throughout this dialogue by drawing out the faulty logic behind the imaginative acts of the father. When the wife repeats 'You say you cant? Then dont do it', directly after her claim that she does not dream, this suggests not only that he should not attempt to survive alone, but through this ambiguous 'it' the mother might also be referring to the act of dreaming – more specifically, she is potentially suggesting that the father should not attempt to dream 'alone'. The mother is therefore not only presenting the possibility of the father joining her in committing suicide, but a rather different possibility – that he defy the social construction of men dreaming 'of danger to themselves' and that he dream of danger to *both* himself and the boy in his care. More than this, she suggests that this protection might have a fictional story-telling quality to it:

The only thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (p. 59)

‘A person who had no one’ should, as the son does with his own phantasmic ‘little boy’, project an identification with ‘words of love’ and continually feed it with ‘each phantom crumb’. The mother’s suggestion even suggests a degree of aesthetic quality in these phantasms – they can be ‘passable’, recognisable as ‘someone’, or they might fail or succeed to the point of being indistinguishable with ‘someone’ to survive for.

This is arguably what the son in *The Road* really is – an imaginary ‘passable ghost’, more so than any other character for it is the position of the father that readers are encouraged to ally with in their likely wish to control narrative events. The father cares about the boy; so too is the reader likely to care about the boy. Readers, in identifying with the father, in allowing his emotions and cares to be partially experienced as their own in narrative empathy, partially live his life for the duration of the narrative; a rejection of the will to live, as in the case of the wife, would mean a rejection of the narrative’s continuation, and it is significant in this way that the mother places so much emphasis upon the father as surviving through creative acts. It is the invitation of the text to identify, an existentialist choice against the mother’s abject lack of ordering system: ‘Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body.’ The characterising details of *The Road* drive us into allegiance with both father and son in this manner, investing readers into their development, survival, and success. Yet the mother is no passable ghost, she exists as poison in these crumbs of heroic survival, and so she is likely expelled as all abject things are. That such a position is filled by a female character is unsurprising given the history of literature; the mother is the furthest nightmare of the male gaze, combining sexualised death and abandonment of men, living on only as a photograph in the father’s pocket, a series of sexual dreams, and as the unanswered question of whether this story of men trying to view themselves as survivors matters at all or if it would not be better to refuse such terms entirely.

3. The Male Gaze in Video Games and the Incest Taboo in *Bioshock Infinite*

This thesis uses feminist theory and female characters in order to stage its analysis of how processes of characterisation and identification work, precisely due to the difference in how some authors, developers, readers, and players have created and respond to characters of different genders. Whilst the thesis therefore uses and attempts to contribute towards feminist theory, its arguments are not carried out for this express purpose but rather use misogyny and feminism as a case study of characterisation. It is therefore important to note that when Mulvey’s male gaze theory is used throughout this thesis, it is considered not in its totality or in its original context but instead the male gaze is used for the conceptual framework it provides

regarding the nature of identification, control, and motivation in audience response to narrative. Many aspects of Mulvey's original work have since emerged as limited by her original psychoanalytic context, her heteronormative assumptions regarding male viewers and directors, and her limited roles for female viewers of films as undergoing 'masculinisation, masochism or marginality' as Jackie Stacey puts it;¹⁶⁵ this thesis is not concerned with the original psychoanalytic context of Mulvey's work regarding the castration complex, for example, not because such arguments are irrelevant to discussions of identification and gender but because they are not necessary for the specific argument this thesis is trying to make that may include but attempts to extrapolate beyond specific considerations of gender and sexuality.

For the purposes of considering how these concerns regarding identification and control might work in relation to video games, it is useful therefore to consider prior feminist games criticism regarding the male gaze in order to explore how such criticism negotiates this issue of 'control' in a medium that seems at first glance to provide a greater sense of agency than others. Indeed, the uses and limitations of the 'male gaze' concept for a feminist analysis of video games have been explored a great deal, with Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series (2006-2015) often analysed in this frame. In older games in this series, the extent to which the character's physical model was shaped with large breasts, unnatural poses, and revealing shorts could be seen as something akin to Mulvey's 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.¹⁶⁶

The term 'male gaze' is often used in shorthand in video game criticism as just referring to such scopophilic sexualisation of passive female characters as opposed to the complex original arguments found in Mulvey's piece regarding the nature of control and identification. For example, Maddy Myers has criticised the use of male gaze theory in games criticism as perpetuating misogynist 'assumptions, over the years, about the "intended" audience of games [...] many game developers do still presume that the player is straight, male, and interested in leering at ladies [and...] pander to these players' eyes only'.¹⁶⁷ However, Myers hints at the finer details of Mulvey's male gaze schema when she argues that criticism using male gaze theory often ignores 'unintentional subversions' emerging from player activity and ignores the large base of female players who often find positive ways of responding to these games rather than somehow being locked out of the experience or masculinised as male gaze theory might suggest.

¹⁶⁵ Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately Seeking Difference: Jackie Stacey Considers Desire Between Women in Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 28.1 (1987), 48-61 (p. 48).

¹⁶⁶ *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1996).

¹⁶⁷ Maddy Myers, 'Femme Doms of Videogames: Bayonetta Doesn't Care If She's Not Your Kink', *Paste*, 30 October 2014 <<http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2014/10/femme-doms-of-videogames-bayonetta-doesnt-care-if.html>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

Although analysis of the subversive potential of these texts may not be as widespread as Myers might wish, *Tomb Raider* criticism has often considered readings outside of the narrow 'straight male' player Myers conceives; for example, in Helen Kennedy's analysis of prior *Tomb Raider* games, performed before the release of the 2013 reboot, she considers the 'range of potential subversive readings' that might exist regarding Lara's sexuality, bodily representation, and potential feminist credentials, only to conclude that there is little 'extra-textual' evidence to support these claims.¹⁶⁸ For example, 'the fact that little evidence can be found of lesbian readings of Lara does not in itself prove that this does not or cannot happen. The ubiquity of the heterosexual readings and re-encodings of Lara leaves little space of legitimacy for this form of identification and desire'. Kennedy suggests that 'within the masculine culture that pervades gaming practice/discussion and dissemination it is unlikely that female gamers will feel adequately empowered to make such a position explicit'.

Kennedy considers the view of Lara Croft as potential sex-object due to her in-game physical representation and the extra-textual sexualisation of her character outside of the game itself, and how these elements relate to the male gaze when we have a female protagonist who is not just there to-be-looked-at but controlled, acknowledging both elements as part of Mulvey's original schema; Kennedy suggests the possibility that for a male audience, 'in this complex relationship between *subject* and *object* it could be argued that through having to play *Tomb Raider* as Lara, a male player is transgendered: the distinctions between the player and the game character are blurred'. However, in Kennedy's formulation, the potential for this transgendering to occur and be recognised as such is disavowed through a simultaneous lack of romantic links to other characters in-game and the hyper-sexualisation of the character outside of the game, with Kennedy concluding that it seems likely 'that the pleasures of playing as Lara are more concerned with mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context'.

Esther MacCallum-Stewart suggests that for *Tomb Raider* criticism prior to the 2013 reboot, critics 'directly refute[d] Lara's potential as a feminist icon because of her body' and that elsewhere:

She is stolen from the realms of female play, and her increasingly overt sexualisation is presented antithetically to that of the female gamer who seems to be invisibly idealised

¹⁶⁸ Helen W. Kennedy, 'Lara Croft: Feminist icon or cyberbimbo? On the limits of textual analysis', *Game Studies: International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 2.2 (2002), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>> [accessed 11 November 2016]

– a feminist who rejects Lara’s disproportionate frame out of principle and therefore refuses to play her.¹⁶⁹

MacCallum-Stewart argues that, taken to their extremes, these sorts of arguments pose questions such as ‘does playing Lara make you a bad feminist for liking her[?]... it is not only not cool to like Lara, it is potentially offensive to do so’. Ultimately, this positioning ‘seems disturbingly like placing her as a moral and sexual compass that refutes sexuality, conflates it with gender, and loses the potential nuances of a truly gendered investigative response’, ‘denying the part that Lara has played in the experience of female gamers’.

In the recent 2013 reboot of the series, Lara’s physical model was altered to more realistic proportions, a female writer Rhianna Pratchett was hired to craft the game’s story, and a lot of focus was given to Lara’s emotional development and motivations as a character. MacCallum-Stewart posits that regardless of the virtues or problems of prior instalments in this series, the 2013 reboot represents an attempt at pushing Lara Croft in a less problematic and more feminist direction when compared with prior instalments. She is still ‘to-be-looked-at’ in this framework, but with less of an exaggerated emphasis upon this characteristic. The only real problem for MacCallum-Stewart was the apparent ‘molesting’ of Croft in one of the game’s early trailers, a complaint which she reads as audience misunderstanding that implied ‘Lara could only become proactive after the threat of rape’. MacCallum-Stewart’s analysis focuses on Rhianna Pratchett’s response to the situation: ‘Pratchett, who was unable to disclose her role in the game’s writing at that point due to contractual requirements, was understandably frustrated by the misreading’ – alongside the nature of wider fan response as showing that ‘players cared about Lara, and wanted her to retain the role of “strong female character” without the caveats that would be unnecessary for a male counterpart’.

Although MacCallum-Stewart identifies the role of the trailer in this fan response, she does not identify one key factor in the furore that surrounded this apparent ‘molesting of Lara’, and one which provides a key for our understanding of how Mulvey’s theories might apply to games. The manner in which one of the producers described Lara prior to the game’s release and alongside this initial marketing material revealed how the game’s team viewed the character they were creating. Such a view cannot be dismissed as subordinate to Rhianna Pratchett’s intention in writing the game’s script, as writing is often subordinate or equal to other concerns in games design and production, rather than the driving force it might be for the reception and

¹⁶⁹ Esther MacCallum-Stewart, ‘“Take That, Bitches!”: Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives’, *Game Studies: International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 14.2 (2014), <<http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart>> [accessed 11 November 2016]

analysis of such narratives as novels. The producer described his view of the player's relationship with Lara like so: 'When people play Lara, they don't really project themselves into the character [...] They're more like, "I want to protect her." There's this sort of dynamic of "I'm going to this adventure with her and trying to protect her"''.¹⁷⁰ The producer went on to link this statement in particular to the aforementioned 'molestation' episode in the game where an enemy male tries to drag Lara away in a sexually suggestive manner, with the producer claiming they 'will try to rape her' and that she is 'literally turned into a cornered animal'.

On the level of feminist critique, these remarks were criticised by many as indicative of the endemic male gaze in the games industry where female characters are usually either romantic interests or figures to be protected, sometimes even when they are protagonists;¹⁷¹ this contextualisation of Lara as being 'protected' by the player is particularly troubling when compared with the absence of such an explanation for Lara's abilities in prior supposedly more problematic *Tomb Raider* games. Indeed, early *Tomb Raider* games did not have a great deal of narrative contextualisation for these abilities of any kind. Much of the early analysis of Lara's character revolves around her body not only for purposes of titillation by the press or feminist analysis by scholars, but for her gameplay affordances in those early titles, which did not contain extensive narrative components. The feminist critic Diane Carr can therefore speak of Lara as being 'driven' with 'mechanised' identification in the same way that James Newman can argue that in games, characters like Lara are just 'vehicles' and 'equipment' inasmuch as their gameplay affordances such as jumping and shooting have prime importance with representational traits irrelevant.¹⁷²

Newman argues that games are fundamentally different from other media in terms of their requirements for player involvement: 'In the *Tomb Raider* movie, I can go to sleep or walk out and Lara will still save the day. But the game needs me [...] The game is nothing without a player.' However, the *Tomb Raider* film does not in fact depict Lara 'saving the day', not in and of itself as an artefact; it requires audience co-construction of its events and characters, with the view of a character 'saving the day' as a moralistic, evaluative judgement upon the facticity of the film's text. Of course few audience members may disagree about this view of the film and Newman is not attempting to make an argument specifically about the *Tomb Raider* film, but I

¹⁷⁰ Jason Schreier, 'You'll "Want To Protect" The New, Less Curvy Lara Croft', *Kotaku*, 11 June 2012 <<http://kotaku.com/5917400/youll-want-to-protect-the-new-less-curve-lara-croft>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

¹⁷¹ Brandon Sheffield, 'Opinion: Video Games and Male Gaze – Are We Men or Boys?', *Gamasutra*, 29 June 2012 <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/173227/Opinion_Video_games_and_Male_Gaze__are_we_men_or_boys.php> [accessed 1 September 2015].

¹⁷² Diane Carr, 'Playing with Lara' in *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, ed. By Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), pp. 172, 175; James Newman, 'The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames', *Game Studies: International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 2.1 (2002), <<http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>> [accessed 11 November 2016]

make this point here to gesture at the inseparability of any narrative experience from the involvement of the experiencer. Just because video games demand explicit operational input from the player does not suddenly render meaningful audience involvement in the co-construction of films and novels non-existent.

Likewise, we do not need to face a binary alternative of viewing ourselves as either controlling a vehicle or emotionally relating to a fully realised fictional character. Beyond feminist critique, the troubling remarks from *Tomb Raider*'s producer about players 'protecting' rather than acting as Lara herself indicate an intersection between the theory of the male gaze and something at the core of how narrative functions. They are suggestive of a potential simultaneous distance and presence in our involvement with fictional characters, albeit manifesting in gendered, sexist terms in that particular case. As I argued in Chapter Two, we do not have radical free will in games; players must either choose between a set of pre-defined options or re-enact the steps of a pre-determined, linear narrative. *Tomb Raider* (2013) provides one such linear narrative where players observe Lara's story as much as they explicitly participate in the re-creation of that narrative. However, I argue that this simultaneous observation and participation is endemic to *all* acts of identification, with readers and players simultaneously participating in the creation of characters from texts and responding to their own creations. It is true of all likeable protagonists in jeopardy, just as it is true of tragedy; we feel pity for the other, and fear for ourselves in that same moment. I both am, and am not, the character I encounter. We can protect them and distance ourselves from them at the same time as we become synonymous with the characters we control. We can view Lara as both a vehicle for player interaction with the world and as a character we can form multiple kinds of emotional relationship with, with identification and distancing possible simultaneously.

The 'unintentional subversions' that Myers refers to arise from this complexity of reader and player construction of character I am proposing; the male gaze cannot hold complete dominance because a) any voice in any text, particularly inference-necessitating prose novels, is impure and compromised by the reader at the moment of reading and b) any text with multiple characters opens up multiple perspectives that interact with and modify one another as the reader constructs a given sequence. This negotiation between multiple characters occurs in ways that are often too complex to be fully accounted for, particularly given the role of reader idiosyncrasy in the process. Video games that seem to provide their players with direct control over events are for this reason perfect for demonstrating these instabilities at a more explicit level.

Moreover, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, Laura Mulvey's argument regarding the male gaze does not just posit a theory of gender presentation and viewer perspective but also how a viewer's emotional investment in a narrative might lead to a wish to control and alter outcomes. In *The Road*, the figure of the mother is abjected in part because of her position as a foil to the narrative's events and protagonists' intentions; if the reader wishes for the father and son to stay alive, she is a dangerous perspective to follow. Narrative-heavy video games are interesting to explore in this framework as they appear to offer control of characters in a literal manner that Mulvey did not anticipate in her 1975 essay, yet as this section will explore, the instabilities in such control over characters in video games not only assist in clarifying the unique affordances of video games as compared to novels but also demonstrate the continuity between the two mediums.

Video games seem, at first glance, to represent a direct alternative to films in Laura Mulvey's original male gaze article. Mulvey characterises viewers as wanting to control events due to their emotional engagement in the narrative; as mentioned before, because viewers cannot control events due to the 'passive' nature of the medium, then due to a combination of this and other devices viewers are led to project themselves into a character whose desires are aligned with their own and who *can* control events – usually, a heterosexual cis male protagonist. In video games, on face value, players do not seem to need to find a figure who has control over narrative events because players possess such control already in playing the game. However, although some control is undoubtedly exercised in order for a game to be a game, as I discussed in Chapter Two these control schemes often involve very different types of control from game to game – in some, movement of a character will be the only thing a player can control and in others players might be able to select dialogue or ethical choices without being able to move a character – and, indeed, sometimes multiple styles of control are presented in alternation within a single game. It is difficult to allow too many types of control at once due to the multi-tasking limitations of human and also the financial limitations of programming budgets; therefore control will always necessarily be limited, at least until the advent of some hypothetical VR simulacra of the real world where anything is possible but even then philosophical arguments regarding free will versus determinism can be summoned to render such control incoherent as a concept.

Due to control schemes alternating and games always removing some element of choice even as another is offered, any distinction surrounding control in apparently active video games versus other supposedly passive media is unstable in a way that is instructive in furthering our understanding of narrative empathy and identification in general. Games offer control at some points and in some ways but, as has long been noted in video games theory regarding cut-scenes

and non-playable sequences, there is a transmedial, filmic quality to those aspects of games which involve a withdrawal of control options on offer to a player. Although one might assume players would project themselves only into their main avatar, if viewers do this with characters in 'passive' media such as films, what happens in the player's relationship with non-playable characters (NPCs) presented in film-like cut-scenes? Does the player's control of the avatar override all other relations? As I suggested earlier in this chapter with regard to multiple characters and identification in novels, readers logically construct the interiority of each character in a text to some extent even if they report feeling allegiance or similarity with one particular character only. Despite exercising control of an avatar in video games, there is no clear reason why these character construction processes would not likewise occur in relation to NPCs if these processes occur in novels or films. Moreover, this situation becomes even more interesting when the avatar is considered both as controlled and non-controlled in different respects and at different points in a sequence – does the allegiance/identification relationship suddenly alter for example in the game *The Last Of Us* when our main avatar Joel appears in a cut-scene as opposed to controlling his movements, and what is occurring in our relationship with Joel when whilst controlling his movements he suddenly speaks to another character without our control? Moreover, as Chapter Four and the conclusion of this thesis will explore, what happens when avatar status suddenly switches to a character other than Joel at various key points of the narrative and we interact as someone other than Joel watching his actions as an NPC? This is not to mention the pre-existing diegesis of the majority of video games narratives that fits the avatar into the milieu of a given fictional game world that necessarily limits control and limits the extent to which we *are* the avatar; for example, despite the game *Skyrim* (2011) being lauded for offering unparalleled freedom of choice for its players,¹⁷³ the player character is still operating within a fictional continent called Tamriel with a pre-existing set of options available at that fictional historical moment that diverge greatly from the player's own background, even if the game does encourage its players to feel some synonymy with their supposedly blank-slate avatars.

These complications and multiple facets of player construction of individual and multiple characters in video games revolve around a similar factor to that of my analysis of novels thus far – sequence and alternation. As part of Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze, the audience wish to control narrative, and the resulting audience projection in films, Mulvey also explores alternation in gaze and emphasis, arguing that the extent to which gaze is diegetically unified between characters and audience is often manipulated as a formal feature of films with a

¹⁷³ *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, dir. by Todd Howard (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011); Tom Francis, 'The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim', *PC Gamer*, 10 November 2011 <<http://www.pcgamer.com/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-review/>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

‘tension and shift from one pole to the other’ as to whether the camera’s look at the actors is aligned to the look of one character at other characters in a film, and how the audience’s look at the camera screen varies through these shifting tensions. For example, Mulvey suggests that when show-girls are depicted in classic cinema, this ‘allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude’ but this does not remain constant as men themselves can be threatened with the gaze of the camera and audience.¹⁷⁴

However, male characters are not subject to the male gaze in an objectifying sense for Mulvey because heterosexual male viewers cannot accept their own objectification in the form of their ‘exhibitionist like’ (the protagonist readers ally with in the text). Therefore in Mulvey’s framework women are instead objectified with the ‘male movie star’s glamorous characteristics [...] thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego’ considered as the viewer’s ‘screen surrogate’ who is ‘free to command the stage’.¹⁷⁵ Mulvey does not merely analyse the male gaze in a dispassionate manner however but puts forward a political proposal to battle its effects in future film making. Mulvey argues in a manner reminiscent of Brechtian alienation effects that viewers should gain ‘distance from the image’ on screen and that filmmakers should assist with this by freeing:

the look of the audience into [...] passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the ‘invisible guest’, and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret.¹⁷⁶

As I argued in the introduction of this thesis regarding Brecht’s own views, Mulvey’s argument here fits within a broad tradition of viewing identification with suspicion as a kind of ‘psychic infection’ and, just as with Brecht’s theories, Mulvey’s proposals against identification act as a negative-space theory about how identification in general works and is achieved. By arguing for distancing and apprehending all characters rather than just identifying with one, the suggestive quality of Mulvey’s own analyses of the ‘shifting tensions’ of the gaze are undermined; Mulvey’s model of identification ostensibly seems to be one of allegiance and claiming one character as an avatar, when her arguments really suggest identification to be unstable, shifting, and always holding potential to break its hold. Identification can instead for all these reasons be seen as an ongoing process involving all characters; the process might produce a feeling of

¹⁷⁴ Mulvey, p. 347.

¹⁷⁵ Mulvey, pp. 347-48.

¹⁷⁶ Mulvey, p. 352.

synonymy with a particular character in a film, novel, or video game, but logically and necessarily identification must be carried out with every character to whatever miniscule extent in order to stage and understand a literary text and to make these evaluative decisions.

Likewise, Mulvey's suggestions regarding distancing as creating a more equal sense of allegiance between the audience and multiple characters is flawed and based on something like an Aristotelian ideal of friendship as being weaker the more friends one has. However, for a text to achieve such universal and consistent distancing between the reader and each character, the sequence of that text would have to somehow overcome the idiosyncrasies of individual response and the gaze which someone brings to a text but also overcome the biases present in sequence such as the primacy effect of early encountered details affecting later characterising details. The answer to this situation is not perhaps to promote detachment from texts, but either to present alternative gazes or, as Myers suggests, engage in 'subversions' of these processes without negating their emotional and pleasurable powers. Mulvey's attention to control, the shifting tensions of identification, and perspective in relation to multiple characters provides a way of further exploring these issues in novels and video games not because I have purposefully set out to create primarily feminist criticism but because, perhaps unsurprisingly to Mulvey and many other theorists, the majority of available examples for the analysis of identification in novels and video games represent distortions and manipulations of characterisation and perspective relating to gender.

In Chapter Two, I explored how the sequence of *The Road* leads readers through various arguments about morality and empathy through its post-apocalyptic world, yet as I analysed in the previous section of this chapter, the abject figure of the mother is likely received by readers in an entirely different way to the male characters, however much reader idiosyncrasy affects these processes. Likewise, the *Bioshock* series of video games highlights certain female characters in a different way to the method through which the series depicts its men, rendering various women into surrogate daughter figures of the play in order to affect the way in which the player responds to or feels about other choices. In the previous chapter I also explored how the first two *Bioshock* games manipulate the player through sequence and varying levels of instruction to make certain choices -- such as killing Sander Cohen in *Bioshock* and then taking an ironic photograph of him or killing Grace Holloway, Stanley Poole, and Gilbert Alexander in *Bioshock 2* -- that may be optional according to the hidden rules of the game but which the player has been persuaded to make through the text's procedural rhetoric. In *Bioshock 2*, it is revealed that the player's adopted daughter Eleanor has been watching the player's every decision throughout the game and ultimately bases her morality upon the player's example no matter what choices the player has made. I have argued that this depiction of fatherhood

represents an intimate alternative to the Randian and Collectivist philosophies proposed in the *Bioshock* series, yet the retreat to fatherhood in a series about the failure of grand totalising political systems is not without its own political dimension with the exclusion of those outside the family as faceless threats to this unit (the splicers) or as figures we stand in judgement of as a fascistic symbol (the militant Big Daddy determining whether to execute a black woman, a weakling, or a collectivist individual without trial).

So too can ideas regarding the male gaze be explored through this game. For example, Eleanor, the player's daughter, is portrayed in early cut-scenes as an idyllic but troubled image of a child, a 'Little Sister' with a lack of sexualisation as appropriate for her young age and with cartoonish facial proportions, yet requiring the player's protection whilst others desire to 'harvest' her for the chemicals within her system. The player's self-construction as a father is directly opposed to the vague sexual overtones found in the manner in which the Splicers pursue the Little Sisters; affectionate touching by the player's character such as handholding with the little girl acts to abject its violent and sexual counterpart in the Splicers' attempts to penetrate the Little Sisters to extract their ADAM chemical to be powered by EVE, further gendering the exchange via these Edenic naming conventions. When the adult version of Eleanor is revealed, her face is largely androgynous and her clothing is suggestive of a thin female archetype; however, the 'Big Sister' diving suit she wears hides the shape of her breasts and other traditional objectified elements in the male gaze through being covered up by the joints where her helmet would attach to her suit and so on, furthering her androgyny. The game suggests that Eleanor needs rescuing as if she were a traditional princess in need of a hero (a common trope in video games as demonstrated by Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2013-15) internet series) only to subvert this trope by showing her to be quite capable of fighting Splicers as an ally that can be summoned in combat. Instead, she is arguably gendered as a total reflection of the overtly masculinised Big Daddy player, rejecting her mother and slavishly following patriarchal example. As I explored in the previous chapter, by hiding the immediate ethical outcome of choices, *Bioshock 2* creates a kind of negative space characterisation for the player to identify with in the form of Eleanor's self-embodied view of what kind of person the player is; this is something the game even allows the player to agree or disagree with in a series of choices if Eleanor misunderstands the player's motivations. Almost all endings involve the player's soul literally living on in Eleanor (whether given freely or forcibly extracted) to further show this transmission of values in the game's metaphorical representation of what happens when encountering all fictional characters – constructing another individual using your own prior thoughts, beliefs, and prejudices with all that entails.

However, in the third game in this series -- *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) – a similar albeit more convoluted situation is employed for dramatically different purposes.¹⁷⁷ The protagonist speaks with a pre-determined backstory, voice, and ending as Booker DeWitt, an ex-Pinkerton agent sent to the Rapture-like rogue city of Columbia, founded by a man named Comstock as an exemplar of American exceptionalism and xenophobia. The player must rescue Comstock's daughter Elizabeth from the city, but discovers along the way that Elizabeth can travel between alternate realities. The game eventually reveals that Elizabeth gained these abilities by being sold as a baby by Booker years before for a gambling debt to a disguised version of his alternate reality counterpart who in turn is revealed to be Comstock, the founder of Columbia. The game therefore reveals Elizabeth as the genetic child of both versions of Booker, the biological child of the player's Booker, and the adopted child of Comstock (the NPC Booker).

Despite the eventual revelation that she is the avatar's biological daughter, the 'male gaze' in this video game is clearly aimed at Elizabeth, the primary secondary character with whom the player as the male avatar Booker DeWitt interacts. As the game is a first-person shooter with few cut-scenes, the player controls the game's camera (equivalent to the avatar's gaze) for the majority of the game. Most likely the player will look at objects and characters of gameplay interest such as enemies or items, and when the focus shifts to exploration the player will most likely look at Elizabeth, the chief actor on screen, due to a variety of techniques designed to invite players to reorient their look in her direction. For example, when the avatar Booker's disembodied voice occasionally emerges from the screen with speech undirected by the player, he primarily talks to Elizabeth; if the player's character begins talking to someone in the middle of gameplay, it is likely the player will either begin to anticipate the other character's response and perhaps look at that character as she responds. Elizabeth is almost constantly with Booker throughout the entire game, contributing her own speech to refocus the player's narrative attention, pointing out objects of interest to provide a gameplay motivation to look at her, and even sometimes engaging in a brute-force method of redirecting the player's camera control by throwing coins she finds at Booker and forcing the camera to orient towards these coins to catch them. The game's designers claimed that they had Elizabeth engage in such behaviour in order to be helpful as opposed to a burden the player must constantly protect;¹⁷⁸ in many ways this supports her 'to be looked at' nature and the player's potential desire for her character, as she provides gameplay support in addition to narrative and possible romantic interest (whether

¹⁷⁷ *Bioshock Infinite*, dir. by Ken Levine (Irrational Games, 2013).

¹⁷⁸ Wesley Yin-Poole, 'Bioshock Infinite's Elizabeth: Ken Levine on creating the best AI companion since Half-Life 2's Alyx Vance', *Eurogamer*, 17 December 2012 <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-12-17-bioshock-infinite-elizabeth-ken-levine-on-creating-the-best-ai-companion-since-half-life-2s-alyx-vance>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

directly from players interested in women or indirectly in viewers who recognise genre cues as to a potential romance occurring).

Although Elizabeth possesses the greatest amount of characterising details of any individual in *Bioshock Infinite*, she is not an avatar for the player's control (aside from a short downloadable add-on scenario for the game). Instead, Elizabeth is a woman to be watched and observed to the point of the game forcing the player to look at Elizabeth at times, ensuring the player notices as many of these otherwise avoidable characterising details as possible. This is underscored in Mulvey's tradition by being designed with a 'to-be-looked-at' sexual quality; unlike Eleanor from *Bioshock 2*, for much of the game Elizabeth wears a tight-fitting corset with a greater amount of cleavage on view than any prior female character in the series, and early trailers for *Bioshock Infinite* demonstrate that at an earlier point in development Elizabeth's physical proportions were even more exaggerated. Likewise, advertisements for the game used this same clothing on a model to further sell this as a key aspect of the game's purchase, accentuating the importance of the costume for those who made the game.

As the blog *How Many Princesses* argues, this clothing is not only 'absolutely sexualised' but inappropriate for the time period depicted, all geared towards aiming the viewer's gaze at her breasts:

The main feature of her outfit is a corset, which is literally worn to shape and accentuate breasts, waist, and hips so that they appear to be more hourglass-shaped. [...] The biggest difference here [from their original use] being that Elizabeth's corset is completely exposed. This is absolutely not period correct, as I've seen some people bizarrely argue. The game is set in an alternate 1912, and women were definitely not running around town in their underwear. [...] Elizabeth's dress also makes what I like to call a "boob window." Her breasts are boxed in by the top line of her corset, a bolero coat, and a choker necklace. All of this serves to attract the eye toward what's in the middle — her breasts. She also has long dark sleeves, which makes her pale skin pop out even more. And what's the most exposed part of her? Oh yeah, her breasts. [...] A real woman can choose to wear a low cut top for whatever reason she wants. It doesn't matter. It's *her* decision. But Elizabeth is an image carefully curated for your entertainment and each and every decision about her clothing, demeanor, and speech has been artificially created by someone other than herself.¹⁷⁹

This sexualisation of Elizabeth's 'to-be-looked-at' formation within the game has interesting ramifications for the player's mutual construction of both Booker as the player's avatar and Elizabeth as NPC (non-playable character). Now, although the player is playing the role of the fictional Booker DeWitt within the game's diegesis, the player's control of Booker is loose; apart from a few early futile choices designed to show the meaningless of choice in a multiverse

¹⁷⁹ 'Let's Talk about Elizabeth's Dress', *How Many Princesses*, 16 June 2013, <<https://howmanyprincesses.wordpress.com/2013/06/16/lets-talk-about-elizabeths-dress/>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

where each decision spawns infinite variations and which therefore have little effect upon the narrative of the game, the only control the player has over Booker's actions is to direct his legs and arms in running and shooting.

The exclusive use of this control system combined with a voiced avatar speaking outside of the player's decision-making necessarily creates a qualitatively different kind of character-player relationship to the silent avatar of *Bioshock 2*, for example. The player avatar in *Bioshock 2* is supposed to be a blank slate whose memories were forcibly removed, whose vocal chords were ruined, and who is compelled to protect the little girl within the story; all of these features represent a diegetic explanation for the player's relationship with the game's control system without providing motivations for the character that might run contrary to the player's own purposes. For example, the player has no control whatsoever over Booker's continued lie to Elizabeth that he is taking her to Paris in a ruse designed to win her trust; there is no science-fiction or plot-based explanation for why Booker does this apart from his own inner motivations to which the player is not initially privy. Although the player is aligned in part to Booker's viewpoint through controlling his movements, outside of this Booker is subject to inference-making processes of characterisation just as if he were an NPC. Given that a first-time player of this game may not know that Elizabeth is in fact Booker's biological daughter since this fact revealed much later in the narrative, the player is invited by the game to construct a sense of the relationship between these characters and the way they feel about one another just like the player would for other similar pairings of NPCs. However, the player's control of the camera and potential construction of Elizabeth through the male gaze throughout the game can be seen to create a curious doubling here. The player might believe that he or she is being invited by the game to find Elizabeth attractive at the same time as the player is controlling Booker as his or her avatar. Due to the simultaneous nature of this invited attraction and the player's control of Booker, the player may *de facto* infer that their avatar Booker is likewise supposed to be read as being romantically attracted to Elizabeth even though Booker himself makes no direct romantic comment or action.

The process of transferring player gaze onto the avatar Booker's gaze can be seen as emerging from all of these elements discussed so far, including Elizabeth's visual appearance, the game's various encouragements to look at her, but also the player's likely genre assumptions. Booker's protective quality, drawing from an archetype of male action heroes throughout cinema, combines with Elizabeth's naïve and dependent nature to hint, particularly in the first half, that there might be some romantic interest between the two despite Booker never making any suggestions of this kind directly through his speech. We could instead argue that as the player is repeatedly encouraged, invited, and even forced to look directly at the sexualised Elizabeth, the

player may infer this attraction as occurring in Booker because the game's procedural rhetoric has led the player to create it on Booker's behalf. To add to this, various yet occasional narrative elements such as Elizabeth's wish to go to Paris with Booker, her questions as to whether Booker is married, and indeed the usual nature of this prince-rescuing-princess stock situation authenticate any player feeling that there might be some romantic chemistry between the two characters. Players may understandably have the expectation based on the majority of modern video games, novels, and films that a beautiful single woman such as Elizabeth is likely to be sexually available to the heterosexual male avatar, and combined with the absence of anything seeming to prevent such narrative assumptions such as the father-child dynamic in *Bioshock 2*, there is no initial incest taboo to discourage players from attributing this motivation to either character within their mental staging of the characters' inner worlds.

However, as the game will reveal that the player's avatar is Elizabeth's biological father, the player will have unwittingly engaged in such a fictional act of incestual desire. An analogue to this situation can be found in the film *Oldboy* (2003), which depicts a man named Dae-Su's sudden and unexplained fifteen-year solitary confinement only to be abruptly released with a taunt to discover who did this to him and why.¹⁸⁰ Early on, Dae-Su learns that in his fifteen year absence he was thought to have murdered his wife and that after his wife's death his daughter was adopted and moved abroad; as part of this discovery, Dae-Su meets a young woman, Mi-Do, who helps him in his journey to find out who imprisoned him. A traditional romance plot ensues between the pair as inevitably occurs in many films featuring an unrelated male and female lead, just as the player of *Bioshock Infinite* might assume there is some romantic chemistry between the avatar and Elizabeth. In *Oldboy*, Mulvey's 'shifting tensions' of the male gaze alternate between the viewer's own gaze directly at the woman on screen versus the problematic ways in which the pair actually act out this romance. The hypothetical viewer gaze at the woman Mi-Do occurs not necessarily in terms of actual desire but through an understanding as to her romantic potential for the male protagonist.

For example, distancing and abjection effects are invited in response to Dae-Su when he tries to act on his apparent attraction in a wild and violent charge against Mi-Do when she sits on the toilet. The scene is even made partially comedic when Dae-Su repeats the line 'Can fifteen years' worth of imaginary training be put to use?', referencing a line from earlier in the film when he wondered if his watching fighting films over the past years could help him in actual combat. Here, Dae-Su is presumably alluding to his fantasising over woman with the conclusion 'apparently not'. Mi-Do responds even more strangely in a surprisingly methodical manner musing on the way in which he should properly approach her in the future:

¹⁸⁰ *Oldboy*, dir. by Park Chan-wook (Egg Films, 2003).

I brought you back here and then turned you down. I can see why you're angry, I really can. You know, I brought you back here because I like you [...] You see, later on, when I'm really ready, I swear on my life that I'll go through with it. [...] I may try and resist you again in the heat of the moment, but no matter what, don't stop. Just give it to me!

In the film's conclusion, in retrospect these odd moments in the development of their relationship are explained implicitly. Dae-Su realizes why he has been imprisoned; whilst at school as a teenager he witnesses a brother and sister engaging in an incestual affair and told others what he had seen, leading the pregnant sister to commit suicide by falling from her brother's arms off a bridge. The brother grew rich and powerful over time and imprisoned Dae-Su for this number of years not just as a punishment but specifically to allow Dae-Su's daughter to grow into an unrecognisable woman and then arrange through a mixture of hypnotic suggestion and direct interference for an unwitting Dae-Su and an unwitting daughter to begin a sexual relationship. Dae-Su discovers this and apparently successfully atones for it by cutting off his own tongue for having had a 'big mouth', thereby leading his enemy to agree to keep the truth from Mi-Do.

The power of this revelation in *Oldboy* involves the 'shifting' diegetic tensions of gaze suddenly uniting once more; the viewer's enacting of the protagonists' relationship collides with the retroactively established knowledge of its incestual and taboo nature, rendering any prior viewer support of (and, for Mulvey, a concomitant wish to control) this romance plot similarly transgressive. In *Bioshock Infinite*, the player's literal control over Booker's gaze, accentuated by the game's ongoing encouragements to look at Elizabeth, implicates the player even further in an incestual transgression. As the player does not control Booker's speech and as he is not so much of a blank slate to allow the player to impose his or her own motivations upon Booker, they are not really Booker's actions at least in terms of verifiable or specific evidence within the game. They are only Booker's actions inasmuch as the avatar is an amalgam of textual detail and the player's interpretative activity, just as with any NPC or indeed Dae-Su in *Oldboy*. The act of controlling Booker's gaze and movements is a narrative affordance unique to video games and is powerful enough to provoke these judgements and emotional responses in the absence of explicit evidence on Booker's part for romance (a burden of proof required for a film such as *Oldboy* for example) due to the player's collaborative activity in physically staging Booker within the game world.

The player becomes Booker in an analogous manner to how a reader of *The Road* might imagine the position of a man trying to keep himself and his son alive in a post-apocalyptic world full of cannibals and apply his or her own personal standards and beliefs to how the pair try and survive this situation; likewise, to make sense of Booker the player must imagine what it

is like to survive within Columbia and travel with Elizabeth. Combined with the shifting tensions of the male gaze and the game's encouragements to sexualise the pair's relationship, such inferences become true and powerful in a narrative sense even in the absence of any hint that Booker was indeed interested in Elizabeth in such a manner. If something is constructed by a reader and no plot detail explicitly contradicts it, then there is no reason to necessarily abandon any idea, particularly if the procedural rhetoric of a text has worked to convince a reader or player of its truth. Whatever the different devices and unique affordances of each medium, a character exists in this way as an amalgam of player and text, with identification modified by negotiation in relation to other characters and emotional engagement, not subject to the same rules of coherency as other kinds of arguments and bound only to sequence of the narrative and the idiosyncrasy of the perceiver's inference.

4. Negotiating Multiple Perspectives in *Enduring Love*

The interaction of multiple characters within a sequence can have a great impact upon the way each individual character is formed within the reader or player's mind, whether these processes involve gendering in the male gaze, altering levels of characterising detail available for various characters, or shifting the control or perspective on offer depending upon a given text's purposes. With *The Road* I explored how a prose text dominated by the perspective of just two characters briefly opens up a third protagonist in its early stages in the form of the father's memory of the mother only for this perspective to most likely be rejected by most readers as antithetical to their emotional engagement with the father and son's struggle. With *Bioshock: Infinite* I examined how player control of perspective in video games can be selectively offered, withdrawn, and manipulated by the game in various ways to encourage certain responses in players. With Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*, I will demonstrate how such manipulations of perspective can be tested in relation to prose fiction that itself engages in perspective shifts at key moments.

Enduring Love manipulates identification by presenting rigorously structured checkpoints along the way that interrupt the predominant narrative of heroism and fear by simultaneously drawing attention to two alternate yet opposite point of views in the form of alternative focalisers in a text otherwise directly narrated by its protagonist. These moments, occurring three times throughout the novel, work to present two radically opposed ideas – that its protagonist is utterly correct to fear his apparent antagonist throughout the novel and alternatively that the protagonist was deluded, had nothing to fear, and that personal issues are to blame. These checkpoints craft the reader's interpretation according to genre codes and whichever possibility

the reader is likely to find the most entertaining, interesting, and aesthetically fulfilling, as I will demonstrate.

Enduring Love is narrated predominantly in the first-person by Joe as a homodiegetic narrator, a science writer whose relationship with his partner Clarissa is falling apart amidst the backdrop of another man, Parry, becoming inexplicably convinced that he and Joe are in love and meant to be together. The novel thematises questions of people's ability to interpret others accurately from the very beginning, when Joe and Parry first meet whilst trying to rescue a child from a balloon accident only for another man to tragically die as the men let go of that balloon out of fear for their safety. During this initial event, Joe's narration moves back and forth to suggest that what he narrates is affected by his discussion with Clarissa in the aftermath of the event, 'delaying' information from the 'buzzard' perspective of imagining himself high above events rather than enmeshed within them.¹⁸¹ In Joe's narration of Parry's dangerous and 'enduring' love for himself in spite of all reason and every obstacle, and in Clarissa's doubt as to the reality of Parry's very existence and love for Parry, Joe's narration is called into doubt in two totally different directions (that he does love Parry and that Parry either does not exist or is harmless). Joe himself posits what the other characters think in a manner which, via all these manipulations of sequence, is simultaneously slightly incoherent (the other characters are not entirely wrong in their accusations as to Joe giving some encouragement in these situations, as I will demonstrate) whilst strongly persuasive (the reader is invited to judge Clarissa as overly harsh whilst judging Joe's narration as accurate and the man himself as heroic). That both *The Road* and *Enduring Love* brazenly state their logical incoherencies in the mouths of wives is a testament not only to the power of procedural rhetoric in overriding logical incoherency as I have argued in prior chapters but also the misogynistic cultural construction of women as foils or objects to be ignored.

McEwan manipulates sequence and these effects in *Enduring Love* in a similar manner to the way in which Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* sequences its various cannibal encounters to lead its readers through a procedural rhetoric regarding trust and ethics in a post-apocalyptic world (see Chapter Two). *The Road* accomplishes this regardless of the internal coherency of the actual stages of this argument, relying instead upon processes of characterisation and reader allegiance. *Enduring Love* shows Parry's obsession with Joe at the same time as the text shows Clarissa's scepticism at Joe's version of events and the growing distance between herself and Joe. This pattern crystallises three times throughout the narrative with varying combinations of a structure involving a chapter told entirely as a letter from Parry or Clarissa, an encounter with

¹⁸¹ Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 2. All further references to this edition will be given in the text.

Parry, and an encounter with Clarissa who refuses to believe some aspect of Parry's obsession; this occurs in Chapters 11-12, 15-16, and 22-23.

The novel juxtaposes this doubt with actual diegetic proof of Parry's obsession in the form of found document chapters featuring letters that represent Parry temporarily becoming narrator of the novel. In each case, such letters increase the likely extent to which Clarissa's doubt might seem untenable to the reader, and even if such letters did not present direct proof of Parry's obsession it nevertheless may seem odd that she is so quick to doubt her partner. Joe's encounters with Parry create a sense of reasonable trustworthiness as to his depiction of events, there is no prior history of problems or arguments between Joe and Clarissa, and Joe generally does not engage in much behaviour in these early stages of the novel to suggest he is not to be believed. Even so, Clarissa has very little patience for Joe's claims and instead seems more concerned by Joe's turmoil regarding his science career options. For example, following Chapter Eleven – composed entirely of a letter from Parry to cement the diegetic truth status of his obsession with Joe outside of Joe's own narration with a lower burden of proof than say the father's narrated and stylised memory of his wife's suicide speech in *The Road* -- Joe brings this doubting aspect of Clarissa's behaviour into direct focus in Chapter Twelve when he decides to search through his partner's possessions and letters to find some explanation for her lack of support:

I told myself that I was acting to untie knots, bring light and understanding to this mess of the unspoken. It was a painful necessity. I would save Clarissa from herself, and myself from Parry. I would renew the bonds, the love through which Clarissa and I had thrived for years. If my suspicions had no basis in fact, then it was vital to be able to set them aside. I pulled open the drawer in which she kept her recent correspondence. Each successive act, each moment of deeper penetration was coarsening. I cared less by the second that I was behaving badly. Something tight and hard, a screen, a shell, was forming to protect myself from my conscience. My rationalisations crystallised around a partial concept of justice: I had a right to know what was distorting Clarissa's responses to Parry. What was stopping her from being on my side? (p. 105).

Joe goes on to posit that this might be 'some hot little bearded fuck-goat of a post-graduate', echoing his own 'penetration' of Clarissa's private space, but can find no evidence of an affair in her letters, yet this whole process foreshadows a turning point later in the narrative where Parry will attempt Joe's assassination at a birthday lunch, picking up a letter with 'her godfather, the eminent Professor Kale, inviting us to lunch in a restaurant on her birthday. I already knew about that' (p. 105).

Later in the novel, this pattern repeats in a manner that not only links directly into this first moment – hinging upon Joe searching through Clarissa's letters – but which develops Parry's obsession to be one of more direct threat and danger, representing a turning point in the

narrative. Towards the end of Chapter Fifteen, Joe encounters Parry on the way back to his home, finding the man with a letter in his hand. The encounter, as usual, shows a gulf of understanding between what Parry appears to be thinking Joe is saying and Joe's fear and disgust at Parry's apparent mental condition. For example, Joe says 'Let me through or I'll call the police' only for the following mixture of description and direct speech to follow regarding Parry: 'He nodded eagerly, as though he had heard me inviting him up for a drink. "But I'd like you to read this first," he said. "It's very important?"' (p. 129). Parry's action can be read by the reader as odd – he does not appear to understand the fear this man has of him – this ultimatum that he will call the police – or in turn be himself afraid of possible legal reprisals for his actions. On the contrary, it is as if Parry has heard something entirely differently – 'nodded eagerly' does not fit as a response to what has just been said – and Joe as narrator cements this possible reader understanding of events with his own reading, 'as though he had heard me inviting him up for a drink'. The reader is forced to generate different versions of the narrative here not because the reader is likely to disbelieve Joe but out of necessity to understand why Parry's actions and words seem to be taking place in a different conversation and context. Readers need to attempt to generate Parry's version of the world as much as they need to generate Joe's version of events for such passages to be effective. However, as the novel is narrated by Joe, 'Parry's version of the world' is only accessible through Joe's biased perspective.

Throughout his narration, for all his apparent fear of Parry, Joe's narration provides and posits what Parry's inner world must be like in feeling this love, hypothesising the elements of his romance: 'There was something he wanted to tell me. First he glanced at the presence over his shoulder. When he spoke his voice was breathy and I guessed his heart was racing. This was a moment he had prepared for' (p. 129). Joe guesses correctly that 'there was something he wanted to tell' him but it remains a guess nonetheless; when Parry 'glanced at the presence over his shoulder', 'the presence' possibly refers to Joe and Clarissa's shared apartment in the building behind them. The apartment is presented as something indistinct and perhaps troubling for Parry through Joe's word-choice of 'presence' to refer to the apartment block as opposed to using the term 'building' or 'their apartment'. Joe's imaginative act on Parry's behalf continues with a shift from 'his voice was breathy' – a statement that seems reasonably factual – to 'I guessed his heart was racing', admitting an element of subjectivity outright with 'I guessed', to finally a judgement delivered with the force of fact – 'This was a moment he had prepared for' (p. 129). None of these things can entirely be known by Joe; perhaps Parry having an alteration in his breathing or tone of voice might be spotted, but so too is Joe fearful and emotionally charged in this situation. It is difficult to disentangle diegetic facts here from Joe's perspective and creative construction of Parry's character. This is nothing unique to this novel, as indeed

any focalisation via the perspective of any character in any text is likely to represent a distortion of 'truth' to a subjective perspective. Of course, even with an omniscient narrator, the reader still infers what these phrases mean and brings his or her own nuanced idiosyncratic interpretation of a text, but the reader's trusting relationship with their inferred meaning of what an authoritative narrator might be trying to communicate is qualitatively different to a more sceptical relationship with a particular character in a text. Stylistic patterns can even have similar effects, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter in my analysis of the mother in *The Road* being recalled only via the father's memory but being unverifiable by any other viewpoint due to the father's focalisation of the scene and the mother's use of his thinking style in her direct speech. Likewise, as *Bioshock Infinite* shows, due to the sequential arrangement of other elements the text can still strongly encourage reader inference as to what a character might be thinking or feeling about other characters even if no direct statement is made.

Traditional questions of unreliability enter this equation whenever we encounter homodiegetic narrators and focalisers, regardless of the extent to which narrators actually seem to miscommunicate events. These questions of reliability emerge because in texts such as *Enduring Love* every encounter with a character who is not the narrator necessarily induces a moment of characterisation for the narrator as well as the character who is being narrated. The reader might also make a separate inference as to what that other character might be like outside of the character's narration, however nuanced and subtle this secondary reading might be. To repeat the earlier formulae, this process of Joe reading Parry does not just represent Reader → Parry but also Reader → Joe → Parry (contributing to Joe's characterisation as much as Parry) and also Reader → Parry (inferring what Parry is like outside of Joe's narration, a kind of reading that is particularly privileged whenever direct speech is used). Moreover, a fourth and more subtle reading occurs in Parry's apparent reactions to Joe's actions (characterising Joe through how Parry reacts to him) as Reader → Parry → Joe, even if Parry does not narrate the actions going on in this encounter outside of direct speech. Readers read readers reading readers.

The narrator appears to be correct in his fear of Parry's obsession, not because Parry goes on to give the expected declaration of love or realisation of unhappiness in their nascent 'relationship' associated with his heart racing and preparing for this moment, but instead due to the bizarre situation Parry describes in perfect keeping with Joe's narration of his character's unpredictability and mental health:

'I paid a researcher and he got me all your articles. I read them last night, thirty-five of them. I've got your books too. [...] I know what you're trying to do, but you'll never

succeed. Not even if you wrote a million and I read them all, you'll never destroy what I have. It can't be taken away.' (p. 129)

Parry suggests that Joe's prior history in science writing is somehow a deliberate ploy to 'destroy' and 'take away' his love through science's conflict with Parry's religious beliefs. Parry is suggesting more than just the kind of incompatibility that might be posited on discovering a new lover holds contradictory ethical beliefs to one's own; Parry is suggesting that somehow Joe has written all these articles to intentionally diminish Parry's love for Joe even prior to the pair having ever met. As we have access to Joe's representation of his own thoughts (proving he did not in fact write science articles to attack Parry) and as the timeline of what Parry is suggesting makes little sense, the reader is very likely to think Parry's accusation to be pure delusion. However, Parry's dominant behaviour has shifted from inexplicable unadulterated joy at their 'love' to become negative for the first time. When this behaviour shifts even further to become threatening, the reader's attempt to understand Parry's alternative world view grows even more urgent inasmuch as tragic implications involving matters of life and death might ensue:

'I'm pretty well off you know. I can get people to do things for me. Anything I want. There's always someone who needs the money. What's surprising is how cheap it is, you know, for something you'd never do yourself?' He let this pseudo-question hang, and watched me. (pp. 129-30)

This threat not only represents a turning point in the narrative towards the climactic events where Parry will attempt Joe's assassination, but a general trend in Parry's behaviour that will culminate in Chapter 22 with his holding Clarissa hostage.

With such a threat of violence, it is imperative for Joe and any readers who feel allegiance for Joe to identify the nature of Parry's obsession and what he might be capable of. Joe's hypothesis of de Clérambault's Syndrome (where a person will become inexplicably infatuated with another without any prior interaction) seems to provide an answer. The novel's conclusion with a found document 'reprinted from the *British Review of Psychiatry*' describing Parry's specific case history encourages a sense that this diagnosis is 'the answer' to this thriller story. This conclusion explains the antagonist's actions in a similar manner to how horror narratives will often explain the life story of the ghost haunting the characters and where such a story provides the tools the protagonists need to banish it from their home. However, the character of Clarissa not only doubts the existence of Parry and this medical condition, but moreover produces a triangle of this constant need to interpret another's actions where Joe is trying to decode Parry's motives, Parry is trying to decode Joe's motives, and now Clarissa and Joe try to interpret one another. Likewise, Chapter 15 concludes with Joe seeking Clarissa in the midst of 'fear' and a

worry that he might be ‘over-interpreting’ Parry’s remarks, only to encounter Clarissa who has realised Joe looked through her letters and was trying to build up the will to look through his letters in retaliation, thinking that this is what he wanted:

‘You even left the drawer open so I’d know when I came in. It’s a statement, a message, from you to me, it’s a signal. The trouble is, I don’t know what it means. Perhaps I’m being very stupid. So spell it out for me now, Joe. What is it you’re trying to tell me?’ (p. 132)

Enduring Love’s structural repetition of chapter combinations (one which contains a letter from Parry to Joe, the other of which usually shows Clarissa doubting Joe’s claims) repeatedly recalls Joe’s own initial invasive curiosity in searching through Clarissa’s letters in this manner. For example, Chapter 12 features Joe searching through Clarissa’s letters, Chapter 15 features Clarissa realising this search took place at the same time that Parry starts making threats, and Chapter 22 features Parry directly carrying out this threat by holding Clarissa hostage. Likewise, this moment where Clarissa accuses Joe of purposefully leaving the drawer open as a ‘signal’ that she does not understand – ‘spell it out for me now, Joe. What is it you’re trying to tell me?’ (p. 132) – echoes the way in which Parry has repeatedly talked of hidden codes in Joe’s behaviour as recently as a few pages beforehand:

‘It’s OK, Joe. It really is. It’s difficult for me too. I understand you just as well as you understand me. You can be open with me. You don’t have to wrap it up in code, really you don’t.’

As I stepped back and turned towards my car I said, ‘There is no code. It would be better if you accepted that you need help.’ (p. 130)

It is not only Parry that searches for codes; Parry is just an exaggerated, mentally ill incarnation of the same kind of behaviours that both Parry and Clarissa engage in. The title of the novel ‘Enduring Love’ not only refers to Parry’s strangely enduring and unshakeable love, or Joe’s enduring love for Clarissa, but has a second sense – that one has to endure and suffer through love. The way in which Clarissa interacts with, suspects, and rebuffs Joe’s struggles with his admirer Parry is in many ways similar to Joe’s own rebuttal of Parry’s love.

The novel thematises the inscrutable nature of not only love but of interpreting other people – one of Joe’s biggest fears over Parry being that ‘Perhaps I was over-interpreting. The ambiguity fed my fear’ (p. 131). Likewise, just prior to Chapter 15’s encounter with Parry, Joe finds a similar example of a failure to interpret the actions of another in his visit to a grieving widow who believed her husband to have been having an affair before his death based on a set of strongly convincing yet circumstantial clues. This widow’s misinterpretation will be proved false in the denouement of the novel following the combination of the final letter and Clarissa doubting Joe combination of chapters, with the repeated juxtaposition between such moments

suggesting such failures to interpret another are part of the novel's larger theme. Even the cause of Parry's sudden threatening behaviour towards Joe and the content of his letter in Chapter 16 revolves around doubt, love, and inscrutability, and here Parry places such doubt specifically in relation to God, Joe's apparent failure to love God, and Parry's belief without proof in both Joe's love and God's love. This nexus of concerns is echoed in the climactic Chapter 22 right before the final letter of the novel when Parry admits he tried to kill Joe – an action that even the reader might have begun to doubt due to the police questioning Joe's account of Parry's alleged attack as unreliable and incorrect in several remembered details. At the point of Parry's confession, as much for the reader's benefit as for doubting Clarissa's ears, Joe insists that Parry repeat himself for proof:

He took a deep breath. We were coming to it. 'Forgiveness?' he said on a rising interrogative note. 'Please forgive me, Joe, for what I did yesterday, for what I tried to do.'

I was so surprised I could not speak immediately. I took my hand out of my pocket and said, 'You tried to kill me.' I wanted to hear him say it. I wanted Clarissa to hear.

'I planned it, I paid for it. If you wouldn't return my love, I thought I'd rather have you dead. It was insanity, Joe. I want you to forgive me.' (p. 212)

Later in the page, Parry once again defies Joe's expectations – here being that he will harm Joe or Clarissa – and instead threatens to commit suicide. Parry links his love for Joe to his love for God and deems both of these loves to be entirely one-sided:

He pleaded in a kind of rising wail, an unbearable sound. 'You've never given me a thing. Please let me have this. I'm going to do it anyway. Let me have this one thing from you. Forgiveness, Joe. If you forgive me, God will too.' (p. 212)

Joe answers Parry's request to kill him by incapacitating him instead. In refusing to kill Parry, Joe rejects Parry's binary choice of forgiveness/non-forgiveness with a rhetorical question predicated both on Parry's mental illness and an apparent newly discovered sympathy in Joe – 'How can I forgive you when you're mad?' (p. 213)

However much this encounter is charged with suspense, excitement, twists, and turns, the aftermath once again takes a narratively unexpected route through the surprising and perhaps logic-defying continuation of Clarissa's lack of sympathy for Joe and her denial of his sufferings. Joe sets up a hypothetical alternative world where 'logic was the engine of feeling' and where he and Clarissa would embrace with 'conciliatory murmurs and words of forgiveness and love [...] But such logic would have been inhuman' (p. 213). Joe critiques this logic as a false product of novelists who promote unrealistically happy endings:

The narrative compression of storytelling, especially in the movies, beguiles us with happy endings into forgetting that sustained stress is corrosive of feeling. It's the great deadener. Those moments of joyful release from terror are not so easily had. (p. 213)

The reader is therefore informed that the usual expected end result of narratives in this genre will not occur and that no 'joyful release' (by which Joe appears to allude to a process akin to Aristotelian catharsis) should be expected. Such a direction is complicated by the way in which the next chapter uses an epistolary format. The reader has been primed to respond to letters as providing evidence and insight into Parry's delusion, but likewise the reader has been primed to expect such chapters to be followed by Clarissa's increasingly unbelievable doubt that such delusion exists. This final epistolary chapter, following this notice that 'joyful release' in a 'happy ending' will not occur, unites these two prior chapter formats in a single chapter and features a letter from Clarissa herself. The fact that Parry has just directly held Clarissa hostage and threatened their lives might invite the reader to hypothesise that 'release' will come in the form of Clarissa finally realising she is wrong. Clarissa's letter has the entirely opposite emotional content as she repeats her earlier doubts whilst still shifting emotional emphasis on to matters other than the gunman who just confronted both of them.

The reader is finally permitted unmediated access to Clarissa's character in a manner not shaped and selected by Joe as narrator in one of the final chapters of the novel after a dramatic climax. The epistolary chapters from Parry's perspective act to humanise him and provide a more internally coherent logic than his disjointed conversations with Joe in real life due to the absence of a narrator mediating his words. This Clarissa chapter on the other hand acts to accentuate those features that readers may have found nonsensical rather than explaining them; indeed, this chapter leaves Clarissa as the only remaining villain figure of the narrative. Earlier when I explored the character of the suicidal mother in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, I argued that she is likely to be abjected by many readers. Even though the mother's arguments about the terrible life they will lead are valid, I argued that abjection in the eyes of the reader is likely to occur as the mother's emotional and stylistic presentation of her arguments is unlikely to promote sympathy in a reader who is already likely to feel invested in the continuation of her husband's and son's survival across the wasteland. Frequently female characters are shaped by authors in this manner as homunculi born from an uncanny valley where the narrative tells us that they are human and experience emotion in a similar manner to other characters, but where the style and events relating to such characters invoke detachment or even active dislike in readers.

It is perhaps of literary interest that Clarissa's character represents an extreme doubting viewpoint for Joe that shows the extent to which the characters must 'endure' love as a

hardship, but likewise it is of feminist interest that the only female character in this novel is the only character to occupy such a monolithic and bizarre argumentative position. As I analysed in relation to the mother in *The Road* and as I will explore in the next chapter in my analysis of the video game *Heavy Rain*, some female characters are characterised in narratives in such a way as to lead to fundamentally different identifications forming in the minds of readers for female characters than might be formed in relation to male characters. Mulvey spoke of women existing as objects to be looked at and men as characters to support as active figures within narratives. Many texts have completed this misogynist project by rendering female characters as more than just objects to be looked at but as the diametric opposite of the desired role of active hero. These texts render female characters as *enemies* of the reader's emotional engagement with various genres, whether consciously or unconsciously on the part of their authors. This class of characters attempts to stymie stories of survival and heroism by denying the existence of such traits, and in so doing engage in a range of behaviours from radical scepticism as in Clarissa's case or to kill oneself rather than live a lie as in *The Road*. They cannot properly be called 'anti-heroes' for that term already contains the potential for the character to occupy a subversively heroic role. Instead, such characters can be identified by the misogynistic concept from which they spring in the form of the 'nag' and engage in such 'nagging' behaviour by opposing the further development of events that the reader might wish to occur or that the reader might believe to be emotionally engaging.

It is the fault of authors that such roles are predominantly associated with women as although these 'nag' roles are likely to be the subject of reader ire, such characterisations are not necessarily representative of poor writing but can serve a function similar to a pantomime villain promoting a different kind of dramatic conflict. Therefore, the role of 'nag' has the potential to be one of great substance and effect, yet its repeated gendering renders it offensive. For an example of how this device can be narratively successful, we can explore the paragraphs after Joe dramatically saves both Clarissa and Parry. Despite Joe's dramatic rescue of both Clarissa and Parry from Parry's suicidal obsession, the main image focussed upon at the conclusion of that climactic chapter is once again Clarissa's disapproval and lack of support for Joe. The location of such disapproval in a short paragraph at the end of a climactic sequence is intriguing for its confounding of the reader's likely expectation. Moreover, Clarissa's utter disbelief that a narrative struggle has occurred between Parry and Joe throughout the past weeks creates dramatic tension inasmuch as Joe and the reader are given a final villain to rail against.

Here, Clarissa is not pleased that Joe has saved her, but instead responds with disgust:

I saw the expression on Clarissa's face. She was on her feet and she was staring at the gun in my hand with an expression of such repulsion and surprise that I thought we

would never get past this moment. Lately my worst suspicions had tended to be confirmed. I was getting things right in the worst possible way. My score was depressingly high. Perhaps we really were finished. (pp. 214-15)

That Clarissa is described as having ‘such repulsion’ upon her face could be seen as outrageous to a reader who has been following Joe’s trials. Joe has just saved everyone – himself and Clarissa from being murdered by Parry, and indeed Parry from suicide. For Clarissa to be disgusted at this is worthy of inviting a kind of repulsion and abjection from many readers herself for reasons that perhaps relate more to the workings of identification than to actual ethics. Clarissa works against the narrative wish of any reader emotionally invested in the novel’s narrative to exert control over events; she occupies the stereotype of the nagging female lead. I am not proposing that such ‘nag’ characters who act as a foil for narrative progression should no longer be present in texts, but there is no need for such characters to be almost universally women. Skyler White from *Breaking Bad* for example is an excellent, well-drawn, and deep character whose opposition to her husband’s lies and unethical behaviour is complex and nuanced. However, as I discussed earlier, the depth of this betrayal has not particularly endeared the character with many viewers who have harassed the actress with claims that she is a ‘shrieking, hypocritical harpy’. The repeated association of such antagonistic ‘nag’ characters with the female gender cannot help but promote misogynistic attitudes where the male character tries to do something exciting and where the female character attempts to stop the man’s journey.

Not all ‘nags’ are necessarily women, although in cases of male characters occupying this role there are often more redeeming features to be found. In Chapter One of this thesis, for example, I explored how disgust operates in relation to the male character of Gradus in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. On the surface, Gradus would seem to fit *Enduring Love*’s depiction of Parry more than he does Clarissa. Both Parry and Gradus are apparently mad for example and obsessed with their respective narrators Joe and Kinbote, with the character of Clarissa seeming to have a similar role to someone like Shade as a comparatively normal bystander. However, if we consider that Kinbote is himself also potentially insane depending on the reader’s interpretation of the novel -- believing that the whole world is hunting him as a lost and fallen king and self-deluded in thinking he had a great friendship with Shade – in many senses Kinbote is more like Parry from *Enduring Love*. Even if he is a stalker and obsessive, Kinbote’s ‘dream’ logic as discussed throughout Chapter One of this thesis has a poetry and emotive power to it regardless of the reader’s acceptance of its diegetic reality – perhaps even enhanced in its tragic implications if the reader believes it all to be falsification.

In contrast with this, Parry is nowhere near as complicated a character as Kinbote. Parry lacks Kinbote's complicated nature in part because Parry has very few opportunities to narrate or focalize apart from the aforementioned letter-writing chapters, as opposed to Kinbote's narration masterfully mixing editing conventions, third, and first-person to convey his viewpoints. However, Parry does possess narrative virtues in line with the genre codes of a stalker narrative like *Enduring Love*; without such a figure for Joe to engage with, where is the conflict and emotional engagement for the reader? Gradus however is oddly stymied in his ability to present an antagonistic threat in *Pale Fire* and is instead elaborated as a 'half man' of stupidity and zealotry in his cause. Gradus's incompetence and lack of depth throughout the narrative is not due to gender however but due to the twist reveal that Gradus may be an invention of Kinbote and that instead a mental patient killed John Shade. The notion that Zembla never existed and that this whole novel is a creative act to defy the meaninglessness of Kinbote's existence and Shade's senseless death emerges in part from this penultimate revelation that the novel's antagonist never existed. In this sense, Gradus is more similar to Clarissa than Parry; Clarissa denies reality, fiction, and story in her conversations with Joe; she argues that nothing the reader is constructing is actually happening and that any sense of drama should end. The distinction between Gradus and Clarissa is that Gradus is a male character designed to fit this role as a consciously badly-drawn character for reasons other than his gender, whereas Clarissa potentially occupies her role because she is female according to the stereotype such characters usually adhere towards. Moreover, Gradus's presence only explicitly contradicts Kinbote's narrative towards the very end of the text, whereas Clarissa not only expresses her doubt of Joe's claims at the earliest opportunity but intensifies them as the novel progresses.

To reiterate the likely emotional and narrative engagement of the reader with *Enduring Love*, a story about obsession and love does not exist without one individual loving another or one individual being obsessed with another; all conflict, tension, and interest in this novel arise from the actions of Parry. When Clarissa accuses Joe of having created or been complicit with Parry's actions, she is correct in a narrative sense if not in an interpersonal sense. Joe himself provides an ongoing guess as to what is going on in Parry's mind in a way that is stepped in the imagery of love, as in Chapter Fifteen where Joe tells the reader that when Parry 'spoke his voice was breathy and I guessed his heart was racing. This was a moment he had prepared for'. That Parry repeatedly defies expectation in what he says towards Joe – loving him yet with a strange logic that appears to respond to actions Joe never actually performed – only invites further reader curiosity and inference into what Parry must be thinking. He is emotional, crying for forgiveness at the end yet also capable of devotion, affection, intense thought, a strange kind of loyalty, and even murderous anger. Readers can feel a range of emotions in staging Parry and in

the imaginative work he demands not only due to his varied emotional life and this greater amount of reader inference required to construct his character but, simply put, because he is interesting and enables the entire plot of the narrative to take place. Clarissa cannot command the same level of emotional character construction due to her comparatively limited repertoire of actions and emotions and her limited significance in the story other than as a foil to Joe's struggle. To describe the role of these characters in metaphorical terms, Joe and Parry can be said to figuratively dance for the reader's pleasure and interest in their conflict; Clarissa not only attempts to stop this dance and the forward movement of the plot but attempts to deny the very existence of their dance or of dancing at all.

When Joe refers to the 'expression of such repulsion' on Clarissa's face at the conclusion, the reader constructs Joe's feelings regarding the event (Joe sees repulsion on her face and feels upset about it), Clarissa's feelings (why does she have such an expression on her face?), and whether Joe is accurate about Clarissa's feelings as a narrator (is Clarissa the kind of character who might respond in this way? Should we trust Joe?). As posited before, simultaneous constructions of different characters occur at the same time here in the reader's mind rather than readers just identifying Joe's character. Due to the repetition of sequences involving Parry, danger, and letters, in addition to Joe's warning that a 'joyful release' will not occur, the reader perhaps expects Clarissa's negativity towards Joe to continue as soon as the following chapter's letter begins. Such negativity not only continues, but reaches an untenable level, beginning by half-heartedly apologising for doubting Joe:

I think I gave you that apology several times last night and I'm giving it again now [...] I was completely wrong and I'm sorry, really sorry. But what I was also trying to say last night was this; your being right is not a simple matter (p. 216)

Clarissa goes on to argue that Joe could have involved her more in his actions (despite Clarissa expressing repeated disinterest in his claims) and that Joe's searching of Clarissa's letters was worse than her abandonment of him – 'your ransacking my desk was a terrible betrayal' (p. 217). Moreover, Clarissa uses the language often associated with men blaming female victims of abuse of rape to suggest Joe's own complicity with Parry's obsession. If Joe's gender was reversed, the following suggestions would be heavily charged with such a context:

I can't quite get rid of the idea that there might have been a less frightening outcome if you had behaved differently [...] I can understand how he might have formed the impression that you were leading him on [...] You denied him everything, and that allowed his fantasies, and ultimately his hatred, to flourish [...] you put my life in jeopardy – by drawing Parry in, by overreacting all along the way, by guessing his every next move as if you were pushing him towards it. (pp. 216-17).

Towards the end of her letter, Clarissa even returns to her previous doubt – ‘You worked out he had de Clérambault’s syndrome (if that really is a disease)’ (p. 218). The parentheses around ‘if that really is a disease’ add proverbial insult to injury through the offhand way in which Clarissa’s doubt extends to a denial of scientific knowledge. Moreover, although Clarissa claims that ‘together we might have deflected him from the course he took’, she offers this retrospective help despite having admitted she had previously denied Parry’s existence early in the letter – ‘At worst, I thought of [Parry] as a creature of your imagining’ (p. 216).

Some of Clarissa’s comments in her letter have a degree of accuracy; if Clarissa were a book reviewer or a literary critic, she would be correct in saying ‘He brought out something in you. From day one you saw him as an opponent and you set about defeating him and you – we – paid a high price’ (p. 218). Joe’s narration does suggest fear and this kind of antagonism as I have suggested, where Joe frequently captures Parry’s facial expressions as hidden wellsprings of love and danger even if he has no idea from moment to moment about the accuracy of his judgements. However, diegetically speaking, Clarissa is for the most part unaware of how Joe has been narrating these events and is not a book reviewer existing outside of this diegetic world but is Joe’s partner. Moreover, Joe was not wrong about his judgement of Parry. Even if the events did lead Joe to become a hero, he is cousin to any number of heroes throughout the history of literature. Clarissa’s incoherent argument renders her single opportunity to narrate the novel outside of Joe’s focalising power to be a disaster for the reader’s likely feelings towards her character. She reiterates various statements the reader knows she has not mentioned before or which make little sense in relation to recent events, and in so doing insults both Joe’s intelligence and the reader’s own. She reports how she could have helped Joe if he had shared more with her; how she did not believe Parry existed, how they could have helped cure Parry, and how Parry tried to kill them but that Joe is somehow responsible for Parry’s behaviour despite believing in Parry’s non-existence.

Clarissa’s argument is incoherent but is incoherent in a manner distinct from, say, the incoherency I explored in Chapter Two regarding *The Road*’s argumentative shift from a world where all others should not be trusted to a world where others are human just like the protagonists. *The Road*’s incoherency was papered over by the world slowly and gradually altering (so the initial world-view of the boy that the pair should try to trust strangers becomes correct in the second half of the narrative). In *Enduring Love*, in no sense does Clarissa’s world-view match what the reader is likely to have constructed throughout the entire novel. Instead, the exact opposite structure is in place in this novel, where the repeated combinations of documentary proof of Parry’s obsession with Clarissa’s doubt at key moments in the novel render Clarissa’s letter absurd in a manner accentuated by her use of the epistolary form that

prior to now has constantly proved that Parry is a threat. Although both Clarissa and *Breaking Bad*'s Skyler White inhabit a similar narrative role, Skyler is crafted in such a way in *Breaking Bad* as to invoke sympathy and even ethical allegiance from viewers who are not already predisposed to view her in a misogynist fashion. Even the mother in *The Road* who commits suicide instead of travelling with her husband and child might invoke some slight level of sympathy for the awful situation the family finds itself trying to survive within. However as I explored at the beginning of this chapter, McCarthy's prose style and the father's focalisation of the mother's speech renders the mother ontologically distinct from other characters lacking their emotional range and existing as mixture of nihilism and sexuality. Clarissa shares some of the focalising and stylistic issues surrounding the mother in *The Road* in that it is McEwan's choice to shape her in a manner distinct from all other characters. It is not misogynist to draw attention to the problems with her behaviour because she is a fictional being whose behaviour is entirely in her male author's control. Moreover, Clarissa lacks any kind of excuse or mitigation of the kind the suicidal mother has with the awful wasteland of *The Road*; worse than this, Clarissa is not even the prime victim in her text.

The novel's shifts in perspective in epistolary chapters towards both Parry and Clarissa as temporary alternative narrators allow the reader opportunities to better understand the extreme perspectives these characters offer in their ongoing direct speech where Joe (and likely the reader) struggles to construct the interiority of either character. The presence of these chapters creates a far more drawn-out critique of the protagonist by his partner than is found in *The Road*'s early abjection and removal of the mother, and can be seen to work as the antithesis of the kind of player negotiation of multiple characters in *Bioshock Infinite* or *Oldboy*. There, the player or viewer might attribute romantic motivations to the characters due to genre assumptions regarding male and female pairings. In *Enduring Love*, the reader must somehow maintain an imagined version of Parry's world (that he and Joe are in love) in order to properly construct Parry's character at the same time as, on a more subtle level, the reader is supposed to trust Joe and Clarissa's repeated claims that they too are in love despite a lack of trust, intimacy, or kindness. The reader is invited to perform mental acrobatics in their construction of multiple possible frames of emotional reference, to make these senses of love endure whatever obstacles in terms of logic or emotional feeling get in their way, and in order to fulfil Joe, Parry, and Clarissa's various narrations and statements throughout the novel.

As I have also argued throughout this chapter, some characters are shaped in ontologically distinct manners to other characters resulting in people who seem in emotional terms to be of a different species to the texts' protagonists. Moreover, such characters are usually women, whether as sexual objects in the male gaze or as the stereotype of the 'nag' who opposes the

heroic journey. Mulvey argues that in many films women are to be looked at and men are to be allied with in their ability to achieve the viewer's wishes on screen. The 'nag' stereotype I have identified does not necessarily sexualise or objectify women but in many senses does something far worse in narrative terms in its implications for the reader's likely emotional response to the character. As I have argued, such characters as the 'nag' are the diametric opposite of Mulvey's male protagonist who is able to achieve a viewer's wishes on-screen; the nag, on the other hand, actively works *against* the reader's wish and if the nag's desired state of affairs comes into being then the plot of the given text would no longer be able to continue. Such a character type as the 'nag' can be effective in narrative terms, but its repeated association with female characters is likely to increase misogynistic responses to future texts and indeed possibly in everyday life.

The device of the 'nag' works mainly in relation to the reader's identification and emotional engagement with the protagonist. As I have argued throughout this chapter this interplay between the 'nag' and the protagonist is one of many ways in which reader attempts to understand and identify the interiority of all characters in a given text rather than the model of prior criticism where readers frequently identify with only one character. Such an attempt to understand and identify all characters creates a need for the reader to critically mediate the interactions between multiple characters particularly when a diegetic focaliser limits access to a given character's inner thoughts. In video games, such perspective is even further complicated. In relation to *Bioshock Infinite* for example I suggested that the control of perspective enhances responsibility for the player's characterisation of the avatar through a more explicit co-creation of the character, although this 'control' is managed by the game through its various encouragements to look at Elizabeth and indeed its forcing the player to look at Elizabeth at various moments. In *Enduring Love*, the narrative can introduce alternative perspectives via direct speech (and therefore brief switches in narration) that are so divergent from the narrator's view of the world that the reader must engage in unusually strong effort to understand why for example Parry thinks he and Joe are in love or why Clarissa does not believe or help Joe. Found document epistolary chapters featuring the unmediated words of their writers act as opportunities for the reader to fully flesh out such alternate perspectives. When the writers of such chapters are then encountered once more in the narrative, the reader will have a stronger sense of the role he or she must enact on the character's behalf.

Furthermore, just as the player's ability to control the camera in video games is a specific medium affordance, so too is the novel's reduction of multiple strata of diegetic reality (dialogue, interiority, senses, and chronological events) into sequential prose a unique medium affordance. These novelistic processes perhaps work in an analogous way to how a film might

likewise force a viewer's gaze (the reader would need to skip a section to avoid obeying the implicit command to read and imagine a line of text) but in a qualitatively different manner to films and games due to the reduction of all sensory stimuli to a sequence of words. The pre-determined sequence of this novel (as opposed to the chance or choice-based novels of Chapter One of this thesis such as *The Unfortunates* or *Pale Fire*) helps in maintaining a strong grip on the reader's pathway through the text. Following such a set sequence as *Enduring Love*'s letter chapters or *The Road*'s cannibal encounters allows literary critics and theorists to talk with a greater degree of certainty as to the likelihood of certain reader responses occurring that might not be as clear without the contrast of texts that have no such set sequence as with video games. However, more so than video games or films, the novel has the potential to create fascinating and bizarre characters due to the presence of multiple characters across sequential prose. Everything in a prose novel occurs in a mono-linear fashion that leads elements of character to be divided pages apart and often absent in that narrators and authors will frequently exclude key details. There is far greater potential in novels than in visual mediums for ontologically distinct 'nag' characters such as the mother in *The Road* or Clarissa in *Enduring Love* to be produced as both sequence and style can severely limit the reader's ability to generate equally deep and emotionally complex interiorities for each character if this sequential progression is not managed properly. In visual mediums there is instead a greater albeit not unlimited opportunity for viewers to interpret visual and aural detail without quite the same level of pre-determined selective detail as is necessitated by the prose medium. This opportunity to interpret characters outside of selective prose detail is, as I said, not unlimited by any means however, as I shall explore in the next chapter in relation to the character of Madison in the video game *Heavy Rain*.

The next and final chapter of this thesis will unite my various arguments as to the nature of reader identification with fictional characters invoking sequence, control, and multiplicity. At various points throughout Chapters Two and Three I have referred to situations where narratives reveal diegetic details that contradict reader or player assumptions or that try to provide explanations for player choice that might not fully account for player reasoning, such as Eleanor's inference as to the player's ethics in *Bioshock 2*, or the player's potential inference of romantic attraction in *Bioshock Infinite* being revealed as incestual. In this latter case, a reading of incest only emerges due to the likely bias of the player's prior inference of romantic attraction acting upon the later revelation that Booker is Elizabeth's father. If players just immediately forget biases and accept new diegetic details in a pure fashion unadulterated by prior inferences, neither this revelation nor any narrative twist could have any emotional impact. I term the influence of prior bias 'reader/player causality' and in the final chapter and conclusion of this thesis I draw out the implications of this concept for identification as a whole.

CHAPTER FOUR: Causality in *The Last of Us*, *Heavy Rain*, and George Orwell's *1984*

1. Introduction

Whether on the macro-level of content and structure or the micro-level of style, there is always a problem in discussing the manipulation of readers and players via sequence due to the fact that readers can and will often act in unexpected or idiosyncratic ways. Once again, the comparison of novels and video games can assist here in further complicating existing categories and providing more tangible ways of discussing what readers and players do in constructing characters. All three prior chapters of this thesis – on sequence, control, and multiplicity – have put forward arguments that have in different ways already and necessarily dealt with this conundrum of the extent to which texts logically necessitate or make likely certain kinds of responses. Sequences not only suggest a certain logic or authority to be followed but necessitate inference; coupled with emotional engagement, inference as to what *might* happen will often transform into what *should* happen next, a wish for certain narrative events to occur. The reader's necessary mediation between multiple characters means the temporary adoption of multiple perspectives in order to understand each character, with identification occurring constantly as an ongoing and evaluative attempt to construct characters, destabilising total allegiance with any individual character.

All of these processes in my theory of identification and sequence might logically emerge as likely for most readers. However, there is a foundational element of inconsistency in the stages of my argument – one which can only be rectified once its latter steps have been established. If my argument is that sequence invites certain processes, such 'sequence' does not causally begin with the text but with the reader, and therefore what readers bring to a text and conceive of themselves as doing is a crucial modifier to all of these processes as well as something which is shaped by the invitations of text and genre. In this chapter I will propose various logical ways in which players and readers can be seen to use what I term their own 'causal' power in relation to how a character or decision is viewed at a given moment, potentially explaining and resolving issues over mimetic and thematic considerations of character discussed through the previous chapters of this thesis. Characters are formed as a combination of diegetic statements in the text and reader/player causality; as explained in the introduction to this thesis, by this term I refer to the way in which reader/player involvement in constructing characters leads to the 'alteration' of such characters in such a way that lends aspects of the reader's own life or values to the character at hand. I propose the term 'causality' instead of 'control', 'interpretation', or

‘involvement’, and so on. The reason I propose the term ‘causality’ is to better highlight the broad philosophical orientation I argue to be a common element to all of the prior terms mentioned and thereby allow for a range of reader behaviours to fall within the scope of this concept. By demonstrating the commonalities as well as the distinctions between video games and novels throughout this thesis, I build to a conclusion that will determine that fictional consequences are still an ethical matter when considered in and of themselves due to this concept of reader causality, even aside from ‘real world’ mimetic and thematic ramifications.

What readers/players bring to characters from outside the text is more complicated than just an imposition of personal real-world morality upon fiction; the reader/player operates as extra textual judge, a role-player pretending to be each character, as the director of a drama and acting troupe combined, and more. I will explore questions relating to such motivations and stances, as well as ontological implications for what exactly fictional characters are, through two video games – *Heavy Rain* and *The Last of Us*. I will then conclude the chapter by exploring all of these concerns in relation to a precursor of the apocalyptic and dystopian novels and video games discussed throughout this thesis, a text which thematises empathy, identification, and abjection – George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). All of the concepts I have explained throughout my thesis, including reader inference of authority, the instability of control, and reader construction of multiple characters, build towards this exploration of reader causality in these three texts; this concept of reader causality is not a fourth stage, however, but rather a making-explicit of an underlying element to the process of identification I have been gradually building toward throughout the prior chapters of this thesis. For this reason, each text in this final chapter has been chosen to shift the argument from texts where players can explicitly make plot choices (*Heavy Rain*) to texts where reader ‘choice’ is limited to the reader’s inference as to what will/should occur in the narrative (*1984*). *The Last of Us* stands in between these two texts as a game where a small degree of explicit choice is allowed but where the player is generally speaking an observer of a pre-determined story and therefore is likely to have a similar wish for narrative events to occur to that of a film’s viewer or book’s reader. Through the full spectrum of controllability found within these sources, I will demonstrate potentially surprising similarities between the bizarre ontology of video game characters and the way in which readers construct prose characters.

2. ‘Are you prepared to kill someone to save your son?’: Playing as Hero, Murderer, and Love Interest in *Heavy Rain*

The video game *Heavy Rain* (2010) presents four characters hunting for the Origami serial killer who has been drowning little boys and leaving paper models on their corpses.¹⁸² The alignment between these four characters and the player who controls them involves kinesthetic physical control not only of movement but also of mind and dialogue, as the player is routinely able to affect what characters say or do in a variety of situations compared to slightly more set-progress games such as the *Bioshock* series. As I argued in Chapter Two however, control in all games is always by logical necessity incomplete and partial. In *Heavy Rain*, control is not always offered over key plot events (some will occur regardless of whether the player wants them to); when control is offered it is often limited to a restricted number of options; and some choices do not have a great deal of narrative impact compared to others. Furthermore, the player's control of four different characters, some of whom interact with one another, means that control is sometimes relinquished completely. Moment to moment, avatars will perform actions and engage in dialogue which is only controllable through set key words. Although players can set in motion events and dialogue according to general intentions, diegetically these events move beyond player intention. The player 'does' something but the character seems to do far more, and it is in such moments that *player* causality most becomes clear in relation to *reader* causality.

As I will argue later in this chapter, the player/reader's causal involvement in texts is not just found in obvious game-specific affordances such as explicit choice-making. Readers and players generate a diegesis from texts that accommodates and moves past the choices made by players and the wishes expressed by readers. By 'accommodates and moves past', I mean that in games players make choices that subsequent narration by characters will explain. For example, if a player chooses to shoot a potential suspect in *Heavy Rain*, the player's avatar will explain why he shot that suspect; this explanation is unlikely to be exactly the same as the original reason the player chose to shoot the suspect as the game has no way of knowing the player's specific intention. Some recent games such as the horror game *Until Dawn* (2015) attempt to more accurately infer player intention through on-screen questions.¹⁸³ *Until Dawn* presents its player with a psychological evaluation between its episodes and asks the players various questions such as to rank the characters encountered so far in terms of likability, what kinds of things they find terrifying, and various ethical questions. Significantly these questions do not actually alter the events that follow apart from affecting the visual presentation of various scenes; however, the presence of such questions as moral choices with on-screen prompts is likely to create the expectation that they matter and that they will affect the game. In this way, *Until Dawn* creates a feeling that the game is trying to actively infer the player's motivation for

¹⁸² *Heavy Rain*, dir. by David Cage (Quantic Dream, 2010).

¹⁸³ *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015).

choice-making even if no active alteration is occurring in the way the game then explains later choices. The example of *Until Dawn* shows how video game characters incorporate both player intent in choice-making and subsequent explanation of these choices on-screen.

With regards to novels, when I say the reader is likely to generate a diegesis that ‘accommodates and moves past the wishes expressed by readers’, I refer to the comparatively less explicit way in which reader interpretation of texts is affected by the reader’s emotional engagement with events. As I have established throughout this thesis, in prose novels characters depend a great deal upon their readers for their resulting ‘existence’ once decoded from the text. Readers may believe they are following interpretations sanctioned by a given narrative, but are responsible for inferring this sense of authority in a way that is highly influenced by the reader’s own predispositions. Therefore when a character is encountered throughout a given novel, the reader is likely to generate a model of what that character would or would not do in a sub-conscious manner that will be heavily biased by the reader’s emotional engagement in the narrative. However, regardless of whether a character does or does not act according to the reader’s expectations, the reader is likely in most (but not all) cases to accept the narrative’s version of events. According to the principle that prior-encountered details and interpretations by readers will affect the way in which newly encountered details are incorporated into a character, however, the initial expectation will shape the way in which the new characterising details are accepted by the reader. Although this situation is distinct from the way in which video games ‘rewrite’ player decisions, video games offer a far more tangible metaphor for exploration of what is an implicit and easily unnoticed process in novel reading.

In video games, diegetic characterisation emerges from player choice as the range of choices on offer is predefined by the game’s programming, even in emergent games. Because of this predefined range of choices, the range of diegetic results for each choice is likewise predefined. Moreover, as many controllable protagonists speak outside of the player’s control in games like *Heavy Rain*, likewise character reactions to choices made on their behalf by the player are predetermined but somewhat bizarrely so as they will often present reasons for their actions very different from those in the player’s mind. However, these results are not necessarily rejected – such diegetic ‘rewriting’ of player choice is a habitual and accepted part of the medium. *Heavy Rain* manipulates this disjunction between player and character for dramatic effect. One of the game’s four playable characters, Scott Shelby, is presented to the player as a private investigator hired by the families of the killer’s victims to uncover new leads and determine the identity of the Origami Killer, an objective shared with the other three characters in the game. For much of the game we are presented with the choices made by a tender man, angry at injustice – choices that we do not always have control over but instead enact Shelby’s

pre-determined behaviour in response to on-screen cues. For example, we avert a mother's suicide and look after her baby while she recovers. We give the child bottled milk and rock her to sleep. We chase leads with the help of a woman we saved from an attacker, the mother of one of the killer's victims, Lauren. Lauren proves herself extremely competent, tracking down the name of the killer by cross-referencing the subscribers of an Origami magazine the killer might have read with a list of owners of a certain kind of typewriter the killer appears to have used to create notes for the victims' parents. Finally, we experience two flashbacks where we play the killer himself when he was a child, running to find his father to save his drowning brother, only to be refused by the drunken, neglectful old man. The drowning child reveals the killer's true name with his final word – the name of his brother and the boy who has tried and failed to save him from drowning, who will grow up to become the player character: 'Scotty'. All of these events occur regardless of player choice, but the player's response to button-prompts on screen still brings them into being to continue the narrative.

In the following scene, we see Scott Shelby, the seemingly likeable, normal private detective crying over a photograph of his dead brother. The player is then prompted (without choice) to pick up each piece of evidence the player has gathered throughout the narrative and throw it into a fire. Flashbacks remind the player of what they have been doing in gathering this evidence, and remind the player of the narrative contextualization the game provided at each occasion – that Shelby claims he needed all these clues to help him discover the killer's identity, a motivation that many players might have accepted blindly. The truth is revealed the final time we actually get to control Shelby's actions and do not just witness him as an uncontrollable third-party 'NPC' (non-player character): we have been the Origami Killer we sought the whole time, and Shelby has lied or omitted truths repeatedly in the course of his so-called 'investigation'. In effect, 'we' have lied to 'ourselves'. The player is retrospectively compromised and betrayed in a manner distinct to the way in which a reader might feel betrayed in light of a twist. We did not just read about the Origami Killer – in many respects we *are* the Origami Killer, and we have been forced to be him.

When we hear of the Origami killer's actions throughout the game, we infer an idea of the character behind him, even –as we believe – without seeing or hearing his physical presence for much of the game. What kind of a man would kill these children? Why does he torment the children's fathers, as we discover through Ethan's trials and Shelby's meetings with various widowed women whose husbands went off into the night to answer the Origami killer's requests? We build a picture in our head as to the killer's possible identity, and compare it with the other characters we encounter to see if the two could be one. If building each character could be compared to the assembly of a jigsaw puzzle, then we build two separate puzzles for the

Origami Killer and Shelby, both incomplete. The moment we realize Shelby is the Origami killer, it is as if these two puzzles are placed upon one another, superimposed without contradiction or overlapping in pieces, to fit perfectly. There is no narrative cheat, no unreliable narration, nothing in the story that prevents Shelby from being the killer, other than his lies to other characters within the game (but never to himself or to the player who controls him). Even these lies are rare and partial: Shelby thrives and protects himself more through clever evasion and omission of the truth, through his charisma and otherwise kind and noble actions. He engenders allegiance and sympathy from both players and other characters within his world, and evades detection as a result.

It is technically possible to figure out the identity of the killer on the grounds of genre and aesthetic considerations. If a player is well-acquainted with detective stories, then it might be noted that Shelby never interacts with the other cast members or any real authorities at all for much of the game; his heroism might likewise also be suspicious, as often the reveal of a killer can be more effective if the revelation breaks some kind of bond of trust with a reader/player and the killer's identity is not obvious. Moreover, if the reveal is to be effective, the killer might be seen as likely to be a main character or one introduced earlier in the game, rather than someone barely seen throughout the story which might lead to a less dramatically powerful conclusion. This is not diegetic or empathetic logic but rather involves guesses as to the genre codes of the text, and might therefore only occur to players who are less emotionally engaged in the story (and therefore more consciously aware of the fictitious crafted nature of the narrative) or who are more familiar with genre conventions and thus more able to recognise these elements.

It might therefore be thought that it is the player's emotional engagement in Shelby's narrative that renders his revelation as the killer so dramatically effective; he has betrayed the trust built up by his heroic actions and measured persona. Yet if we *are* Shelby to some extent, if we control his actions, then who did we trust throughout the game, and who do we feel betrayed us? The player's participation in Shelby's character means we cannot talk about him as entirely separate from the player, nor can we describe what occurs in the reveal as 'betrayal' since that would require that another party be involved. Here, the emotional power of Shelby's betrayal emerges due to the player's participation in Shelby's character as a positive force (acting as if we were Shelby trying to carry out good deeds) combined with the player's accumulation of characterising detail from the diegesis (Shelby as a third party to be learned about, who we watch as if he is in a film). The chimeric nature of these characters means that they are born from both the causality of our choices as players and the text's subsequent rewriting of that causality as proceeding from diegetic characterisation rather than from the player (so instead of

choice *x* occurring because the player had a particular motivation, it is revealed in game as proceeding from the character's history and personality). At the same time, however, radical free-willed choice is not possible: the games' designers have decided what is possible for each character do at each moment. We, as the player, select which of the options included in the design each character will take. We can choose whether, for example, Shelby allows an old and evil man to die by not helping him reach his medication. We can make a choice here because his characterizing details up to that point accommodate a range of reactions without rendering the overall character of Shelby as incoherent (as with the Arno stealing wine scene in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* discussed in Chapter Three) or rendering him a mere vessel for player choice (as with the lack of diegetic characterisation for the protagonist in a game such as *Skyrim*).

However, our choice is nevertheless limited; we cannot choose whether Shelby attempts to murder children, as such events have occurred prior to the game and are not on offer to us as players. So, how do we talk about our response to a character that is both –us- and not –us- at the same time? Frequently throughout this thesis I have posited that texts can 'impose' their ethics upon players/readers through the logical necessity of restaging/constructing what one infers to be a text's or character's perspective, even if opinions that differ from the reader's own are likely to be dismissed afterwards (so, as in Chapter One of this thesis, reading about misogyny in *The Unfortunates* imposes temporary repetition of the act). Furthermore, I have established that the instability of choice and control in video games can be extended to novels and films with a 'wish to control' narrative events. The comparison between games and novels extends in both directions, however, as the player of a video game will still undergo identification in relation to non-controllable characters albeit in a different manner to the identification the player will experience in relation to his or her avatar. Moreover, as the player cannot completely control the avatar in any game, the player will therefore act as an observer of his or her own character at times even as this character is being physically controlled by that player. The troubling factor here in relation to Shelby is that the player engages in multiple ways of constructing a character at the same time that are not entirely coherent in their methodology. The player tries to apprehend the character's personal history and interiority at the same time as the player causes the character's agency to come into being through his or her choices. The player's inference of the character's interiority in addition to the choices the player has made on behalf of the character are both rewritten by subsequent diegetic revelations of Shelby's status as murderer, upending the player's causal function even further. For example, if a player believes Shelby to be a good man based on his words and non-controllable actions within the game, and if the player makes a decision to be nice to a potential witness because the player wants to be an ethically upstanding detective, neither of these aspects of the player's

identification can remain after it is revealed that Shelby is a murderer and that he is pretending to be good in order to achieve his goals.

Whether restricted to *Heavy Rain* or evocative of wider concerns, however, Shelby's characterisation has great implications for the ethics of player decision-making and character construction in terms of the ontology of the character produced. If, as I have claimed, readers and players must temporarily adopt perspectives they might later disagree with in order to evaluate them, sometimes perpetuating unethical mental behaviour such as misogynistic thought patterns, then what happens if players make decisions that are then retroactively rewritten by the text to emerge from different motivations to that which the player intended? These different diegetic explanations of events are provided to explain a character's actions, but as those character actions were chosen by the player, the narrative can be said to 'rewrite' the motivation behind the choice in the diegesis as stemming from the character's personality as opposed to whatever motivation the real-life player originally had for making that choice. Such rewriting is likely to be accepted by the player – it is habitual in games – but traces of the original motivation for an action is still likely to have left an impact upon the player. It would be as if a decision I made five minutes ago is suddenly rendered unethical through reality warping around me to replace my original intention with another, or at the very least emotionally convincing me of the alternative intention's validity and truth in that past moment. How can fiction present a coherent ethics if character construction is often founded upon such bizarre premises in comparison to 'real life'?

The game contrasts Scott Shelby in this regard with another playable character, Ethan Mars, a man who must complete five trials to prove his love for his son, hence the game's marketing tagline, 'How far would you go to save the one you love?' Viewed as an overall progression in this way, the trials begin as physical tests (requiring the player to engage in quick and accurate button presses or to intuit the best path across the screen towards Ethan's obstacles, such as when the player must drive against the traffic down a busy road to demonstrate courage, or crawl through glass to show one's willingness to suffer). These physical tests gradually give way to primarily ethical tests, asking whether the player is willing to value the life of a morally-compromised stranger such as a drug dealer over that of a little boy (the killer's pre-recorded tape asks 'Are you prepared to kill someone to save your son?'), or value your own/Ethan's life over his son's (the tape asks 'Are you prepared to give your life to save your son's?'). In this final test, the player must drink a vial of poison in the knowledge that Ethan will die within an hour, but that the final clue to Ethan's son's identity will be given and Ethan will be able to find him in time (the poison is in turn revealed as a placebo if Ethan takes it). In all scenarios, there is nothing in the game's pre-determined characterisation of Ethan to suggest he is particularly

skilled or fast enough for many of these challenges – players of the game also know that he failed to navigate a shopping centre and move fast enough to save his son Jason (a death the player had no control over). There is nothing in the game's characterisation to suggest how Ethan might respond when forced to kill another, or himself. All of this is down to the player's control of Ethan, that aspect of his character we inhabit.

It is *our* morality on trial, not Ethan's, despite Ethan enacting our choices as his own in his responses in subsequent diegetic rationalisations of player causality. Ironically, however, alienation is invited through repeated suggestions that Ethan may himself be the Origami killer; Ethan experiences frequent blackouts after which he wakes up in the rain holding origami figures in his hand. Such clues represent a red-herring, as Ethan's blackouts are ultimately unexplained and Shelby is revealed as the killer later in the game. However, for a large portion of the game players are encouraged to believe they may already know the killer's identity. As it seems as if we are not seeing all of Ethan's history or character, our ability to act as if we are him is compromised. Ironically, Shelby's history and even some of his present-time actions are hidden and omitted by the narrative throughout the game. Such omissions may be taken as a cinematic convention, however, whereby the viewer is unlikely to see all the events relating to a particular investigation but where the director will cut to and from scenes of pertinent interest. In this video game, familiarity with this cinematic convention would mean that the player might not necessarily be suspicious about why the game does not show us such absent moments. Instead, the player is likely to hold the impression that they know pertinent details about his character early on – that he is a private detective with a heart of gold – and therefore the player is invited to more fully inhabit the character at hand with less caution. We do not feel like we are still trying to work out who Scott Shelby is throughout the majority of the game, whereas the narrative goes out of its way to raise overt question marks over Ethan's sanity.

Trust in Shelby can lead to complex ethical situations arising through an interplay of player causality and textual expansion of diegetic history and motivation. At one point in the narrative, Shelby and his partner, Lauren, are trapped in a car beneath water, put there by the father of a copycat killer in an attempt to silence both of them/us forever. The game does not reveal that Shelby is impervious here – for all the player knows, Shelby needs to get out of the car as soon as possible, but however long the player takes Shelby will still survive. This task is very difficult to accomplish, complicated by an implicit choice regarding whether to try and save the unconscious Lauren first. If she is not saved, she dies. If Shelby somehow escapes confrontation with the other three playable protagonists and does not die for his crimes at the end of the game, in a post-ending cut-scene we see that Lauren has tracked Shelby down, realizing he is the killer and brandishing a gun at him. Shelby, without putting up any resistance whatsoever, is shot.

Lauren is the only character who persistently interacts with Shelby, admiring and trusting him. Therefore to some extent Lauren's admiration and trust of Shelby mirrors and authenticates the text's patterning of the player's likely opinions throughout the game; this final vengeance feels satisfying as an answer to the character's betrayal.

This ending with Lauren killing Shelby can only occur, however, if the player chose for Shelby to save Lauren earlier in the storyline. Shelby-the-murderer (the character he morphs into after the revelation of his identity) has become his own undoing through the player's potential choice to save Lauren, a choice made without the narrative having yet confirmed his status as killer and therefore without the player knowing that it would have been more coherent to allow Lauren to die due to her piecing together of clues. The metaphorical river of Shelby's diegetic characterisation rights its course, however. The game once again diegetically rewrites player causality by suggesting that Scott cares about and perhaps even loves Lauren in this version of events; the game responds to the player's choice to save her by showing the pair briefly share a kiss a little while later. If the player makes Shelby's character into someone who cares more about another than about himself, then this is authenticated as already having been true of Shelby's characterisation by subsequent narrative events; if the player decides that Shelby should save himself, then this likewise is authenticated by Shelby's reveal as a serial killer. Shelby's characterisation here contrasts greatly with the alienated identification mechanisms present for Ethan Mars. When Shelby is revealed to have been testing Ethan and by extension the player to find out if the player/Ethan is a good parent, so too has the player likely been wondering throughout the game whether the character we are controlling in the person of Ethan is a good father or not. If we evaluate Ethan, we are deciding whether the actions we caused a character to engage in qualify him to be a good father. To further capture the bizarre nature of this situation, it must be remembered that Shelby's characterisation at this point has not just emerged unfiltered from the game's presentation of events but will likely be heavily influenced by the player's inferences as to the kind of man Shelby is.

If we think Shelby is an innocent prior to the revelation of his murderous ways, then he *is* an innocent until the game contradicts our identification and reveals such innocence was just a glue we injected into Shelby's character to help his characterizing details fit together, the same kind of gap-filling inference that occurs in response to all fictional characters out of necessity. If we can say that we feel morally guilty, repulsed by our retroactively making choices as the causality behind the Origami Killer, we are also repulsed by that part of us that previously admired Shelby's diegetic characterisation. We literally made Shelby a good person. The player has assisted Shelby in his subterfuge not just in obeying button prompts for Shelby to collect evidence from various people but in the way in which the player belief that Shelby is a good

man means he *is* a good man until the game's revelation of his murderous ways. When the tormented Ethan Mars meets his tormenter Scott Shelby, in mere moments the player inhabits both positions, and the player-inferred motivations of both characters throughout the entire game clash. The game's trailer asks the question "How far would you go to save the one you love?" The question is not so simple when there are multiple 'you's within the game, when there are multiple loved ones.

Heavy Rain's only female playable character, Madison Paige, further complicates this clashing of multiple characters through the misogyny latent in her depiction. Due to the qualitatively distinct affordances offered to her player both in available choices and in the predetermined diegesis relating to her character, she provides useful contrast with Shelby and Ethan for understanding these processes. Madison's playable sections entirely revolve around her gender; she is either a nurse for Ethan Mars, a sexual partner for Ethan Mars, or preyed upon by men in various sexualized situations from which the player must extricate Madison. Madison's first playable scene in the game features her waking up late at night and walking around her apartment scantily clad, with several uneasy camera angles following her movement. The game's camera likewise keeps Madison's body and animations at a distance to foreground her body in a way that rarely occurs with any of the male playable characters. There is little characterising detail to introduce her to the player when every other character is introduced through speech or a real situation pertinent to the game's larger narrative. Moreover, as it gradually becomes clear that Madison is being watched and is not alone, the player is alienated from Madison in something similar to a 'slasher' scenario as highlighted by Carol Clover in relation to film –the player knows of the danger, she does not, and she cannot act upon our knowledge or suspicions.¹⁸⁴

This whole sequence is revealed retrospectively to have been a dream when Madison then wakes up, and this nightmare of men breaking into a single woman's apartment to attack her in the middle of the night is the beginning of a theme of sexualized male violence that continues throughout her narrative. Each time Madison is unaware of a threat or plot detail which the player can quite clearly intuit, she loses her authority as a reliable strategist in relation to the narrative's forward momentum of solving the mystery and even of staying alive. This role of strategist is comparable to the father and son varyingly occupying the position of reliable strategist in *The Road* (as analysed in Chapter Two). The player is alienated from Madison's perspective and through this alienation a situation is created that is akin to the aforementioned infamous statement by a producer of *Tomb Raider* that the player might feel they are protecting the female avatar rather than becoming her. If one's emotional engagement with a narrative can

¹⁸⁴ Carol J. Clover, 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film', *Representations* 20 (1987), 187-228.

lead to a wish for certain outcomes to occur and also allegiance with a character with a great deal of agency suited to achieving such outcomes, then Madison is excluded from this position.

When we next see Ethan, Madison plays the nurse. An undercover journalist, Madison pretends to be staying in the same motel block as Ethan in order to get a story about the father of the kidnapped boy. She tends to Ethan's wounds, and throughout this process Madison is controllable by the player in a manner reminiscent of a Shelby scene immediately prior, where Shelby bandages the wounds of a woman who attempted suicide. This contrast only serves to emphasize Madison's almost entirely blank nature at this point and Ethan's similarly weak status. Furthermore, when Madison then talks to Ethan and she answers various questions Ethan has (and which the player might also have, in the absence of any other characterisation), Madison only has a single dialogue option every question, presenting the player with far less agency than any other conversation. Some of these dialogue options are even lies, such as claiming she is a professional furniture photographer. Control is then unceremoniously transferred to Ethan when she leaves, her bandaging complete. The player's causal power is far less intertwined with the character's diegetic characterisation here not only because we have little choice but also because even as we control Madison's kinesthetic movement, she exists as a series of functions without much knowledge of the killings compared to other controllable characters such as Shelby and Ethan. Madison is once again distanced from the player's own position of knowledge. The player may wonder whether Ethan Mars is the killer, but at the very least he has greater knowledge of narrative events than Madison and has been established as protagonist through the series of trials the Origami Killer has set Ethan (and by extension the player). Although this comparative lack of knowledge on Madison's part does not completely prevent her becoming a focal point of any allegiance and identification for the player, her lack of agency combined with the presence of the 'real' protagonist of the game might mean that even though the player is controlling Madison, the scene at hand is really all about Ethan. Madison's number of dialogue options increases the next time we see her once again acting as Ethan's nurse. The game even reverses the dynamic so that she is the one asking him questions about his identity instead of the reverse. However, these questions are ones that the player already knows the answer to just as Ethan does; the player is once again aligned with Ethan's perspective despite our technically controlling Madison in this scene. Moments such as this further emphasise that although the processes often occur at the same time, literal control of a character in a video game is *not* precisely the same process as allegiance or feeling synonymy with a particular character.

For a period late in the game, Madison's storyline emerges from Ethan's shadow. Although many of these episodes are problematic and perhaps poorly executed in some respects, they do

provide a window for some revealing differentiation between different groups of possible players. Madison spends the latter part of the game chasing various leads relating to the killer's identity and in the process visits the house of a doctor who gives medicines without prescription. Madison is offered a drink by the doctor, and we could hypothesise that some cis male players might not be suspicious of this drink in the same way as many women are encouraged by society to be suspicious of drugged drinks they have not prepared themselves. In such a situation, if a cis male player for example fails to be suspicious of this offer, the terrifying results could be said to demonstrate how little cis men can truly conceive of a female world view that experiences danger and oppression as a matter of daily lived experience. If the player does drink this, or if the player spends too long in the man's house without leaving, Madison is knocked out and nearly tortured in the basement unless the player fights back successfully. If she does fight back successfully, it seems to be to no avail as Madison stops moving and the doctor begins stroking Madison's body before moving in to kill her, only for Madison to spring up, having pretended to be dead. The symbolism of the scene is not subtle, with the doctor attempting to use a power drill in the direction of Madison's crotch. The episode is certainly problematic in its cheap reliance on sexual violence and horror film penetration tropes,¹⁸⁵ and even more so in that the game removes control of Madison in order to have her surprise the player by her pretending to be dead. Madison not only knows little about the killings compared to other characters but the player is not allowed to control her in the same way as other characters can be controlled. Even though Shelby is a murderer, the effective nature of this twist emerges from negative space; when controlling Shelby, the player's actions and motivations are likely to highly resemble Shelby's own albeit for distinct overall agendas. With Madison in this scene where she pretends to be dead, Madison's behaviour is far more distinct from the player's own; her status as a woman affects her characterisation in this world more than Shelby's status as serial killer seems to affect his own.

When Madison follows up her next lead in a nightclub, the actions required of the player are again heavily gendered. Madison needs to make herself seem sexually attractive to attract the attention of the owner, Paco, so she can question him. As a cis male player, it might feel incredibly strange to make choices to expose Madison's skin, to alter the height of her skirt and the buttons open on her blouse, as if in some way violating the character. Such a feeling of violation would suggest an orientation from the player towards the character not of acting *as* Madison but instead viewing her as separate to the player. Several industry figures have similarly reported feeling uncomfortable about this scene.¹⁸⁶ For some female players, being

¹⁸⁵ See Clover, 'Her Body, Himself' cited previously for more on such horror tropes.

¹⁸⁶ Tom Bramwell, 'Cage defends Madison striptease scene', *Eurogamer*, 27 August 2009

<<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/cage-defends-madison-striptease-scene>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

forced to sexualise themselves to progress and to attract approval might be seen as a regrettable but widespread fact of life. When the nightclub owner then takes an interest in Madison, she is almost raped at gunpoint before the player is able to knock the man out. These moments, and the drinking choice in the previous scene, could be read as interrogations of the male gaze. Regardless of how successful we view the game's developers to be in achieving this aim, Madison's gendered challenges could be seen to mount a Bogostian procedural rhetoric to make certain players aware of how women are expected to act in certain societies. They either invite a great feeling of synonymy with the player for those who are aware of and understand these situations, or promote partial alienation, albeit with sympathy, as players recoil in surprise with a lack of frames of reference for the experience.

This brings me to the most problematic example of player characters interacting in the game, and my concluding point for this analysis of *Heavy Rain*. Shortly after Madison is almost raped, she returns to Ethan Mars's hotel room only for Ethan to have the option to kiss and then have sex with Madison. At no point in the process does the player control or get to make choices on Madison's behalf. It might be argued that such a mechanic of controlling multiple characters' choices simultaneously might be unworkable.¹⁸⁷ Why give priority to Ethan here, where in every single other interaction between them we have controlled Madison? Is it for the titillation of an assumed male perspective to sleep with the 'to be looked at' character of Madison?¹⁸⁸ If considered in sequence, it does not make much sense in real-world psychological terms; a woman that has just almost been raped is not likely to jump into the arms of someone she hardly knows, and Ethan's son is still in danger – why is this man breaking from his quest to save his son for his own sexual gratification? The pair have hardly interacted, mostly just for Madison to tend to Ethan's wounds. Madison is reduced from a point of identification and synonymy to more of an object, a body for the player as Ethan Mars to have sex with. The choice is made as Ethan, not as Madison, and her final appearances are clichéd and almost comical when summarised. In the epilogue Madison can potentially capitalise on all of her experiences with a tell-all book only to encounter a second serial killer who threatens her once again; Madison can adopt Ethan Mars's son; or Madison can bizarrely insist that Ethan should not in fact mourn his dead son but should impregnate her instead. In this final scenario, Ethan then engages in an

¹⁸⁷ The fascinating *Game of Thrones* (Cyanide, 2012) roleplaying game attempted this simultaneous control of multiple characters when the two protagonists, Mors the Night's Watchman and Alester the Red Priest, finally meet; the player selects dialogue options for both characters in turn, holding a conversation with themselves in a convoluted and confusing manner. The game's poor critical reception suggests such experimentation to have failed (see Metacritic <<http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/game-of-thrones>> [accessed 1 September 2015]).

¹⁸⁸ Moreover, the circumstances of Madison's creation by her programmers and artists is suspect compared to the male characters; Madison has a different visual model for referencing for her body to the person who provided her voice acting, as opposed to the three male protagonists who have the appearance in-game of their voice-actors. See 'Heavy Rain's sexism problem', *How Many Princesses*, 21 December 2013 <<https://howmanyprincesses.wordpress.com/2013/12/21/heavy-rain-is-really-sexist/>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

unintentional tragicomedy moments later by proceeding to shoot himself around twenty feet from where Madison has just made this suggestion.

Player causality – by which I mean not just the ability of players to make choices in games but also their involvement, interpretation, emotional investment, and anything which brings the idiosyncratic presence of an individual player to bear upon the narrative at hand – operates differently in *Heavy Rain* in relation to men and women. Madison is not given the same narrative affordances as other characters and certainly on a gameplay level is controlled in a very different manner to the male protagonists. This is not to say that Madison could not be reclaimed or that the player could not have some positive experience in playing through her storyline, and responses to her characterisation could be shaped by the identity of the player as male or female and any prior bias on the player's part. Nevertheless, as my analysis of Shelby, Ethan, and Madison has demonstrated, the game clearly sequences its gameplay and narrative offerings in such a way as to promote stronger albeit distinct ties with Shelby and Ethan. In this framework, Madison is subordinate to the other protagonists, and it is difficult for the player to easily become causally involved in Madison's story not just for the lack of choices compared to other characters but her subordinate placement and constant victimisation. The 'wish to control' I explored in Chapter Three in relation to Mulvey still operates here – players are likely to ally with characters capable of doing what they want as players or what they are positioned to want by the game. Madison's demotion demonstrates that it is not just choice that enables or limits player causal investment, whilst Shelby's betrayal shows the presence of such causality in action through the disastrous emotional consequences of such identification with Shelby's character being utterly broken.

3. 'I lost people too': Stance and Shifting Avatars in *The Last of Us*

The video game *The Last of Us*, considered by some to feature the greatest video game narrative of all time,¹⁸⁹ thematises empathy and humanity in a post-apocalypse where the majority of humans have either murdered one another or have been rendered mindless predators through the *Cordyceps* fungal infection. Unlike *Heavy Rain*, there is virtually no choice offered in terms of bifurcating the diegesis in different directions; however, it is still quite possible to discuss the events of the game as inviting the player to wish for certain events to occur or to summon their own real-life values as a reference point just as the previous chapters of my thesis have

¹⁸⁹ *The Last of Us*, dir. by Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann (Naughty Dog, 2013); see 'The 100 Greatest Video Games of All Time: #1 – *The Last of Us*', *Empire Online*, <<http://www.empireonline.com/features/100greatestgames/game.asp?title=1>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

established. The game shifts the player's dominant stance in relation to these characters in a myriad of ways, often involving shifting tensions between what you might do in real life (imagining yourself in the place of the character but in such a way as *tabula rasa* ignores the prior constraints of previous characterisation); what you think the character as depicted in the game might do based on prior characterisation; what you think that character *should* do or what might be best for him or her; larger concerns as to how actions might affect all characters in the ensemble (although an action might promote good for one character, how can that be weighed against the potential benefits or problems it might cause for other identified characters?); and abjection/othering of characters to try to avoid all of these prior stances (something which is not entirely possible in a pure sense but which can occur to large extents or after the fact). These stances are equally likely to emerge, combine, and shift in the majority of readings novels and playing of video games by logical necessity, not just with regards to future moments in the narrative but with the evaluation of each event as they occur. Each of these dimensions shows a way in which players might logically relate to the characters at hand and suggests the kind of causal investment a player might make in a particular character, often with one or more stance working in tandem.

Although *The Last of Us* does not offer much in the way of explicit plot-altering choices, the concept of player causality can be seen as instructive in relation to set-sequenced texts such as this. To reiterate my explanation of 'player causality', by this term I refer to the way in which in video games a player's choice can be rewritten by the game's diegesis as stemming from the on-screen character's personality as opposed to the player's own involvement in the text, regardless of whether such choices are explicit in altering plot events or implicit in terms of interpretation and a wish for events to occur. *The Last of Us* is an ideal bridging point between choice-based games and set-sequenced novels in this regard due to its hybrid nature as a game where more than 99% of narrative encounters lack any possibility of multiple diegetic outcomes due to player choice, but where the penultimate moment of gameplay leads the player to make a choice without any signposting that a choice was on offer, with some players only realising they had multiple options upon reading about it in articles.¹⁹⁰ In this section I will analyse the player's shifting involvement in the text throughout *The Last of Us* and will conclude with an analysis of this final choice, determining the extent to which prior narrative involvement can be said to involve player causality even if choices are not directly made in the narrative world. Moreover, the game's depiction of Joel and Ellie as a kind of father and daughter pairing travelling across a post-apocalypse, the father getting sick, and the daughter being faced with a group who do not

¹⁹⁰ Mark Villamor, 'The Choice We Don't Know We Make In The Last of Us', *Venture Beat*, 23 June 2013 <<http://venturebeat.com/community/2013/06/23/the-choice-we-dont-know-we-make-in-the-last-of-us/>> [accessed 1 September 2015].

try to take her weapon and who have children with them, is narratively highly similar in plot and theme to the story of *The Road*, although *The Last of Us* acts in many ways as a critique of *The Road*'s arguments in how it develops this narrative situation and therefore serves as an ideal final game for this final chapter.

The narrative of *The Last of Us* is contextualised by an initial prologue level that shows the outbreak of the *Cordyceps* fungus crossing over to humans and turning them into zombie-like figures and the game's protagonist, Joel, fleeing his home with his daughter Sarah and his brother Tommy. Through the majority of the playable prologue that follows the initial cut-scene of *The Last of Us*, the player controls Sarah, who wakes up to an empty house, televised news reports of a dangerous outbreak and collapse, and missed calls on the home phone. She shares the player's likely confusion and feeling of danger as news of the outbreak spreads, with the player controlling Sarah's vision as she is able to look out the back of the car in all directions as the family flees their home. Her diegetic curiosity is therefore likely to mirror the curiosity of a player who wishes to steer her vision in multiple directions to witness the game's narrative. After a car crash, the player's control is shifted to her father Joel, and after a cut-scene shows him picking up the injured Sarah, the game's prompts make it clear that the player must flee to safety with the girl. Eventually, the player is led to approach a member of the military, appearing upon a hill as the characters' potential salvation. However, a combination of the soldier's confrontational stance, his belief they might be infected, and Joel's own gradually defensive verbal and body language create a sense of oncoming potential danger, reaching a crescendo when the soldier says on his radio: 'Sir, there's a little girl', with a pause before he begins shooting. Joel falls back down the hill with his daughter, whilst his brother Tommy arrives as a saviour to rescue them and shoot the soldier. Due to the speed of this encounter's unfolding, the brother's arrival, and the normal progression of advancement and achievement of goals throughout the video games medium, the player may not initially realize that Sarah was hit by the soldier's fire, just as Joel does not realise it for a few moments until he runs over to his dying daughter and cradles her, saying repeatedly 'Don't do this to me, baby. Don't do this to me, baby girl. Come on', words which will be echoed later in the narrative.

This initial encounter inverts player expectations of threat – the humans of this world are far more terrifying ethically in some respects than the infected zombies, figures which may in some senses represent metaphors for the violent potential of humankind – whilst also using perspectival devices to achieve narrative empathy for these characters and the barest understanding of Joel's shock and loss. The player's initial character is dead, and Joel's shock at the loss of his daughter is echoed by the player's own likely shock at the narrative progression; a stance of trying to interpret the events on the basis of Joel's diegetic characterisation is unified

with the player's own likely direct response to witnessing the event. The narrative affordance of the game allowing the player to control the daughter for a time and then to control the father in protecting his daughter is powerful; the player's first avatar is dead minutes after control is shifted, with the player's new avatar having been unable to protect the first, compounded on a film-like level by the observing viewer's genre assumptions perhaps leading the player to think she might have survived based upon the brother arriving to rescue the pair. In the same way as *The Road* patterns its readers to expect certain things of interactions between the protagonists and strangers, so here does the entirety of the game echo and revolve around this initial scene, whether implicitly or explicitly, with the game's shifting control cementing this not just here but in later interactions between Joel and his surrogate daughter figure Ellie.

The game repeatedly builds towards tragic climaxes such as this only to employ cinematic cuts with text indicating a time change and eerily mournful music. Each cut shows the characters in a new situation and invites the player to infer events in the interim. The player's mental model of the two characters is therefore rarely stable as the characters are intermittently re-introduced with new gaps in their history that must then be inferred on an ongoing basis. However, due to the association of these jumps with traumatic events and the inability of the characters to fully overcome them, such patterning encourages the player to mimic the trauma of the characters. Just as the characters cannot forget events that occurred months or years ago in their timeline, players are likewise unable to forget the traumatic events that occurred just moments ago in their play-through of the game. We think of what we would do in this situation partly because, in a sense, the events *have* occurred to us in that we witnessed them just as the characters did. However, due to the narrative time jump, this stance of 'how would I respond in this situation?' does not match the diegetic depiction of how the characters are responding precisely because the player is not able to see the character's prior response over the intervening time period, so we are still grieving when characters have already sublimated this grief into their ongoing personalities.

The first cut of the game, occurring after this soldier kills Sarah, is a prime example of this disjunction between player and character – twenty years pass instead of a few months as in later cuts, and a much older and humourless Joel awakes from sleep with a panicked expression. This awakening from a dream rewrites the opening events of the narrative prior to this point as the basis of a nightmare which has haunted his sleep the night before. Joel's daughter is hardly mentioned going forward until he eventually meets his brother once more, but the memory of this initial encounter may inflect in the player's mind almost everything that Joel does, says, or appears to show in his body language or facial expressions throughout the game. The version of Joel that wakes up after twenty years is far harsher than the one presented in the opening; the

player is presented with no deceptive and gradual switch in the text's argument as with *The Road* or the jarring personality switch of *Assassin's Creed: Unity*'s murders for wine. The gap of twenty years created in the narrative here combined with the traumatic event of the daughter's death are likely to invite inference in the majority of players as to why this man might have become a ruthless killer mistrustful of authority and others. The game does not need a character to state this explicitly, although some come close later in the game such as when Joel re-encounters his brother; even outside of such moments, however, the sequence of the game itself effectively makes this argument regarding Joel's motivations and ethics.

Joel soon meets Ellie, a young girl entrusted into his care to smuggle out of a military-protected city on behalf of a supposedly altruistic rebel group known as the Fireflies, initially with the help of his girlfriend Tess. As becomes apparent during their journey, Ellie has been bitten by one of the infected. This infection has spread the *Cordyceps* fungus to her mind but no further and has led to no visible signs of infection beyond her covered bite mark. Ellie's apparent immunity seems to be unique and provides an opportunity for humanity to recover from this blight. The entire narrative and gameplay experience of *The Last of Us* builds to a point where Joel decides to condemn the entirety of the human race and prevent Ellie from being killed to provide a medical cure for the worldwide infection, out of his growing feelings of paternal love for this girl who becomes a surrogate daughter to replace the one he lost in the prologue, and against the wishes of that girl who very much wishes to sacrifice herself in this manner. The world is damned out of love for a single individual, and the structure of *The Last of Us* invites players to form their construction of these characters in such a way that he or she may be likely to agree with Joel just as much as they might simultaneously condemn him. This simultaneous response is likely to occur precisely due to the game switching perspective and control of characters throughout between Joel and Ellie at key moments in a similar way to how *The Road* gradually switches authenticating power between the father and the son. This final choice by Joe to kill those trying to extract a cure from Ellie is the surprising gameplay culmination of the player as Joel killing hundreds of infected or human hunters. In this climax, Joe's victims believe themselves to be good people, but Joel's motivations may detach slightly from the player's in not carrying about this self-justification on the part of those who intend to harm Ellie. In killing the Fireflies at the end of the game, Joel's ethical motivation is solely for Ellie's survival above all other considerations.

Early in the game, however, Joel is initially distant towards Ellie and self-consciously uncomfortable around a child of her age. Due to the juxtaposition of his meeting with Ellie and the initial sequence where the player saw Joel's very natural manner of interacting with a teenager as a father, the player may infer Joel's discomfort is due to his grieving over the loss of

his daughter or possibly an inability to fully grieve and process her death. In my analysis of *Heavy Rain*, I discussed how the lack of knowledge and ability to act towards a narrative's 'strategic goals' according to genre and dominant values within a text can encourage distancing from the player, such as with Madison Paige. In *The Last of Us*, the player is simultaneously distanced from and emotionally close to Joel in these early moments; the player has undergone many similar experiences to Joel and can infer why he is upset and distanced from Ellie, yet many are likely to also realise that Joel's distance is emotionally cold and that due to genre expectations he is likely to grow closer to Ellie later in the text. As the player has not actually made decisions on Joel's behalf there may not be as much of a sense of responsibility for his actions here in a causal sense, but rather simultaneous frustration and aesthetic interest in his emotional struggle not yet reaching the same point as that of the player. The player's inability to make explicit choices here is something like a phantom limb; the wish for events to occur is still there even if it cannot directly be enacted, with the force of a player's causality still lurking in every moment of interpretation and enjoyment of a narrative yet without such extensive ontological implications as a game such as *Heavy Rain*.

Soon after these early events Tess sacrifices herself so that the others might get away, with a similar conversation about their self-definition as survivors to the one I analysed in Chapter Three between the father and mother in *The Road*:

Joel: What are we doing here? This is *not* us.

Tess: What do you know about us? About me?

Joel: I know that you were smarter than that.

Tess: Really? Guess what, we're shitty people, Joel. It's been that way for a long time.

Joel: No, we are *survivors*!

After Tess dies, the player is not likely to see any real sign of grief in Joel at his girlfriend's self-sacrifice, not only refusing to talk about it but getting actively annoyed and uncomfortable when other characters such as Ellie mention her name. This is one of the few tragic incidents where we see its aftermath rather than the game jumping forward as it did with the death of Sarah. This incident is marked by its lack of any depiction of closure, just as the time jumps elsewhere in the narrative provoke a feeling of lack of closure in players who have just witnessed tragedy only to be instantly transported to a point in the narrative where everything appears fine. Joel does not consider himself to be 'shitty' but a 'survivor', an imperative to live at all costs beyond good and evil. Tess's sacrifice makes no sense to Joel in this framework as it suggests some actions are more important than living, whereas Joel has not only engaged in murderous activities to survive but even grappled with whether to continue living prior to this journey, as he steadily reveals throughout the game and even emphasises in his final speech. This wish to survive for survival's sake is mirrored by the game's early objectives which do not

encourage exploration but survival via tutorials that teach stealth, shooting, and other survival mechanics. Joel is a survivor, so the player re-creates the text's arguments regarding survival on the level of gameplay to echo this identity.

It is only as Joel begins to get to know Ellie as they travel together that the gameplay devices of *The Last of Us* expand, allowing the player for example to notice Ellie lingering at various locations and press an optional button prompt to speak with her when outside of combat. Selecting these button-prompts is an entirely optional action and only available at predetermined moments in the game. Therefore if the player selects such non-compulsory prompts and chooses to have Joel speak to Ellie, the player is only likely to have done this if he or she is curious about the girl or wants Joel to interact with her. Such curiosity in turn is likely to have emerged from the way in which the game's cut-scenes and other events invite the player to *want* to be so curious about Ellie. She interacts with newly encountered areas and expresses a curiosity the player might feel at likewise encountering a new area; moreover, Ellie's emotional responses to panic or to traumatic situations (such as an encounter with a cannibal named David, to be discussed later in this analysis) likewise invite interaction for a player who might wish to see his or her own feelings of trauma or narrative empathy dealt with and voiced by the narrative.

Moreover, such interactions are important with regard to Ellie as a result of the manner in which they develop the player's characterisation of Joel. A wish to interact with Ellie may come from the text's invitations regarding curiosity about her character or the environments visited. However, through Joel's own resulting words with Ellie, his own diegetic motivation in talking to Ellie may be revealed as slightly different from the player's personal motivations, rewriting player causality in a similar manner to *Heavy Rain*. Such interactions might involve a mirroring a sense of curiosity and wish to interact, but also represent a developing relationship troubled by the similarity of his relationship with Ellie to that he had with his dead daughter Sarah and all the grief this triggers for Joel. Cut-scenes such as that of Joel and Ellie riding in a car together listening to an old cassette tape not only show a developing bond between the pair away from the immediate dangers of the infected and of other humans, but implicitly mirror the opening Sarah scene where Joel rode to bring his daughter to safety. The player may not only feel like he or she learns about Ellie's character directly through their interaction but will also construct further characterising detail for his or her mental model of Joel.

All of this contrasts a great deal with *Bioshock Infinite*'s similar mechanics in tone and execution. Although *The Last of Us* encourages us to notice what Ellie is doing and to look at her, the focus is on her actions, behaviour, and feelings, not her appearance. Ellie is clearly a

young teenager with no sexualised corset window as with Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* and on the other end of the spectrum no androgynous diving suit as with Eleanor in *Bioshock 2*. The incest taboo is in place in *The Last of Us* not just due to the clear age difference and lack of sexualisation but also the player's own likely comparison of Ellie with Joel's biological daughter from the beginning. Likewise, the use of the third person as opposed to first person camera encourages the player to form a slightly different relationship with the avatar in *The Last of Us*. We do not see through Joel's eyes or control the camera via his look (and the same goes for our brief control of Ellie), but rather we use Joel as a central pivot for much of the game to which the camera is tied and through which the player can assist in protecting both characters from harm through gameplay. We are still attached to the character's perspective to some extent but for example when Joel speaks outside of our control or prompting, we see the character doing so visibly on screen, unlike *Bioshock Infinite*'s first-person unseen avatar speaking from behind the screen. This makes the gaze in *The Last of Us* far more detached than in *Bioshock Infinite*, and combined with the lack of an overt 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in Mulvey's formula in relation to any character, these effects are neutralised. When the player is encouraged to look at Ellie's actions, it involves a dialogue option to speak with her, allowing interest to be expressed not as a gaze but as fatherly conversation. Joel's relationship with Ellie is symbiotic rather than just protective; not only does she save his life on numerous occasions in cut-scenes but at one key moment control shifts to Ellie to let the player act as her in rescuing Joel.

Halfway through the game, after finally reaching the Fireflies' research laboratory, they discover the Fireflies have not only failed in their prior research but that the scientists at this laboratory have either died or fled. Hunters attack the building and Joel falls onto a metal spike that impales him. His resulting pain and bleeding causes him to gradually lose focus and need help standing. The gameplay controls suddenly become ineffective for shooting and running, which further cements an identification between Joel and the player's own control in a kinesthetic manner not possible in novels. Finally Ellie has to guide him out of the building and after Joel seems to be at the point of dying, another of the time jumps associated with traumatic events occurs. It is now winter, not autumn, and the player controls Ellie standing alone, raising the very real possibility that Joel might be dead. In the resulting combat throughout this section, the game removes many of the gameplay options such as the multiple weapon types and skills the player will have earned for Joel whilst controlling him. Video games theorist Jonas Linderoth has hypothesised that a key part of game narratives involves what he terms 'ecological advancement': the process in which player and character become more powerful and

skilled through the challenges of a game.¹⁹¹ Linderoth's theory can be seen as operating in player skill, diegetically within the game's fiction, and formally in the accumulation of weapons or what are often known as 'experience points' in games that allow new skills or control options to open up based on spending these accumulated points gained killing enemies. For Linderoth, ecological advancement in games does not need to feature actual improvement in skill by the player but can just widen affordances as the game progresses to create the illusion of such improvement.

There is a removal of ecological advancement gained within *The Last of Us* up to this point with the shift in control to Ellie, who has none of the upgrade advantages earned by the player throughout the game in a formal sense of unlocked control options. However, Ellie nevertheless turns out to be surprisingly competent as a result of the player's skill level (learned through reaching this point in the game) merging with the diegesis; if the player is skilled at shooting due to controlling Joel for so long, then so too is Ellie automatically skilled as the player controls this aspect of her character, passing on that knowledge to a new character. As much of the narrative shows Ellie learning about the world and combat, this advancement within the diegesis is completed by the player's own transfer of these skills to Ellie, just as Joel himself taught Ellie some of these skills in the story.

As mentioned, the player has no idea after a time jump if Joel survived or not. Playing as Ellie hunting a deer with a boy in snowy woods, the player comes across two men and, using her bow as a threat, tells them to drop their weapons; one of them, a man later identified as David, tells the other to comply with Ellie. The appeals David makes about them having women and children, allowing Ellie to keep her gun, and his kind calm voice echo the ending situation of *The Road* where the boy encounters a man who makes the same claims regarding women and children and who also allows the boy to keep his gun. Throughout my thesis, I have argued that the sequence of *The Road* leading up to this moment features a shift from the novel's first half where strangers are to be rightly feared to the point of attacking them to a second half where strangers deserve cautious empathy. This pattern culminates in such a way that after the father's death, when the boy meets this stranger who acts utterly unlike the others and allows him to keep his gun, the reader may think the boy is safe without having total certainty over such a belief. *The Last of Us* works to critique this scene in *The Road* by revealing David to be the leader of the group of hunters that led to Joel being injured, that they were looking for a man and a girl to avenge their dead, and even allows Ellie to flee with antibiotics for an injured Joel

¹⁹¹ Jonas Linderoth, 'Why Gamers Don't Learn More: An Ecological Approach to Games as Learning Environments' <http://www.utbildning.gu.se/infoglueCalendar/digitalAssets/1775376948_BifogadFil_Why%20Gamers%20Don't%20Learn%20More%20FINAL.pdf> [accessed 1 September 2015].

(revealing him to have survived) only in order to lure the hunters towards his position. Ellie is recaptured and discovers the group are cannibals, though David wishes to keep her alive. The game suggests based on the way another hunter suggests Ellie is David's new pet', and the way David talks to her, looks at her, and touches her hand through the bars of her cell, calling her 'special'. As a result, the player may realise that his earlier kindness was a ploy to groom her as a potential victim of his paedophilia. If the player did not perceive this danger, they are in a sense aligned as a victim of David's manipulation just as Ellie has been.

The player shifts back and forth at this point in the game between Ellie escaping and a healed Joel waking up to go and find Ellie. The combination of paedophilia and cannibalism with which David threatens Ellie is a powerful motivator in the player's potential support for Joel brutally torturing a hunter for the location of his camp and then killing him anyway. This motivation in turns creates a situation where the player is likely to support or forgive behaviour that will in the next section of the game lead Joel to murder an already injured and defenceless woman. Likewise, as Ellie escapes by biting David and therefore infecting him with *Cordyceps* due to her immune status, when David chases Ellie in the final room of the area he is made even more monstrous through the addition of an early onset of infection, leading to twisting and quivering. However hard the player tries, Ellie is inevitably pinned down in a position implying her possible imminent rape, with control lessening gradually as the player presses on screen prompts to escape but is overpowered. Finally, however, Ellie manages to stab David a few moments before Joel enters the area in an attempt to rescue her – an attempt that is unnecessary as both the player and Ellie have already rescued themselves through Ellie's own actions. Joel comforts Ellie with the same words he used at the beginning of the game as his daughter died in his arms, 'baby girl', a shift that will become crucial in the game's denouement.

In the conclusion of the game, as I mentioned earlier, Joel and Ellie finally find the Fireflies yet with unexpected results. The scientists attempt to operate on Ellie to find a medical cure for the *Cordyceps* infection, believing they have no other choice as they need to examine her brain in order to see how she has become immune to the symptoms of infection. Joel wakes up after being knocked out by soldiers to find that Ellie is already being prepared for surgery and, without the player being able to choose, attempts to save her. The player must kill a great number of Fireflies in order to rescue her, finally arriving in the room where Ellie is being held and murdering several unarmed medical staff before exiting with Ellie in his arms. In the ensuing section where the player controls Joel's physical movements as he flees, Joel repeats 'Come on, baby girl, I got you, I got you' and various variations upon this phrase, thereby echoing the beginning of the game exactly when he/the player carried Sarah in their arms as they tried to get to safety. This time, the player succeeds.

After exiting an elevator to the car park, Marlene, Ellie's former mother-figure, aims a gun at the player, with the following dialogue exchange raising many ethical questions for Joel and the player in the same manner as I discussed earlier with self-definitional statements about being 'survivors' or 'shitty people'; this dialogue exchange at the end of the game not only asks Joel whether he is doing the right thing, but asks the player to directly consider his or her own real-life ethics:

Marlene: You can't save her. Even if you get her out of here, then what? How long before she's torn to pieces by a pack of clickers? That is if she hasn't been raped and murdered first.

Joel: That ain't for you to decide.

Marlene: It's what she'd want. And you know it. Look... *[She lowers the gun]* You can still do the right thing here. She won't feel anything.

The game then jumps forward in time in the same manner as each prior tragedy of the narrative, whether Sarah's death at the game's beginning, the murder-suicide of a pair named Henry and Sam that our protagonists meet along their journey, Joel's almost-dying in the Fireflies laboratory, and Ellie being rescued from David's attempted murder-rape. Although nothing has ostensibly happened here prior to the jump, the player is likely to have been trained by the sequential logic of the text to have expected some traumatic event to have occurred. Instead, Joel is in the car with Ellie waking up in the back seat still wearing her surgical gown, with the pair engaging in the following dialogue:

Ellie: What the hell am I wearing?

Joel: Just take it easy... drugs are still wearing off.

Ellie: What happened?

Joel: *(pause)* We found the Fireflies. Turns out there's a whole lot more like you, Ellie. People that are immune. It's dozens actually. Ain't done a damn bit of good either. They've actually st—They've stopped looking for a cure. I'm taking us home. I'm sorry.

In the only moment of analepsis in the entire game, we then see what actually happened with Joel and Marlene. As soon as she lowered her gun and said 'you can still do the right thing here', Joel fires his own weapon at Marlene and puts Ellie in the car.

Marlene: Wait! Let me go. Please.

Joel: You'd just come after her. *[He shoots Marlene in the head, cutting to black]*

This climax manipulates various temporal devices such as jumping forward and backwards in time to not only evoke certain traumatic emotional responses attached to previous time jumps and thereby prime the player to expect tragedy but also to ruthlessly restructure the player's identification with Joel. The player has been invited to remember Sarah's tragic death at the

hands of authority when Joel repeats ‘baby girl’ and ‘I’ve got you’, and also to sympathise with what this moment means to Joel – that he is not only saving his new daughter Ellie but is in a sense ‘correcting’ his old failure to save Sarah.

After appealing to both the player’s personal response to viewing the situations of the game and our sense of what Joel must be feeling according to his diegetic characterisation, the game then raises several implicit questions: *according to the game you have played so far and the narrative events witnessed, do you think Ellie is at risk of being killed by Cordyceps infected people or raped/murdered by hunters?* Concomitant to these questions is the idea that if Ellie can yield a cure for humanity, then perhaps these situations will not have to be faced by anyone at all in the future, healing this world. Joel sidesteps the question by making it an issue of personal choice, but Marlene then says ‘It’s what she’d want. And you know it’. Indeed, Ellie’s characterisation so far has been entirely aimed at achieving this end and the player has witnessed her will to self-sacrifice to achieve this goal.

When the game flashes forwards and we see Ellie in the back of the car and see Joel lying to her, Marlene’s questions drive a potential schism between the player and Joel. Joel does not appear to have listened to Marlene’s questions, but this does not mean that the player has to disagree with Marlene as well. With barely a minute or so to emotionally apprehend what Joel has done in potentially ridding the world of its cure, the player is shunted back to this moment of decision in flashback by seeing Joel respond with violence to Marlene lowering her weapon. When an injured Marlene then suggests that she be allowed to flee with her life, Joel executes her on the chance that she and the other Fireflies might one day try to take Ellie again. Joel shows more emotional agony in lying to Ellie in the car a few moments before in the ‘present day’ than in the flashback to this extremely quick and barely-considered execution, which is one of the only times we see Joel kill someone in a cut-scene outside of our control. This lack of player control further widens the gap between the player’s potential view of Joel as constructed throughout the narrative and the character as revealed to us in these final moments.

In the introduction to this section I suggested that *The Last of Us* is an ideal bridging point between choice-based games and set-sequenced novels due to its hybrid nature as a game where more than 99% of narrative encounters lack any element of player choice but where the penultimate moment of gameplay leads the player to make a choice without any signposting that a choice was on offer. There is, however, one key choice. When Joel enters the room to rescue Ellie and kills the medical staff, an action I engaged in as a player, it is not actually necessary to kill them at all. It is a choice so subtle and so carefully invited that many players do not even

seem to realise it even was open for player control. When Joel enters the room, the following dialogue occurs if Joel kills the doctors:

Nurse: Doctor?

Doctor: What're you doing here? I won't let you take her. This is our future. Think of all the lives we'll save. Don't come any closer. I mean it.

[Joel kills the doctor]

Nurse: No! You fucking animal!

Doctor 2: Kari, shut the hell up!

Nurse: Please. I don't wanna die. Oh god... oh god...

If the player does kill these characters despite their protestations – something which might be likely as the game does not foreground a choice as being available – the player has in effect prefigured Joel's own actions a little later in the game in murdering a defenceless and (at least in her self-image) righteous woman, Marlene. It is important to note that the player is not made aware that he or she had a choice over whether to kill the medical staff; if they move past the doctors without killing them, the game does not highlight that players have engaged in a particularly noble action. When the medical staff beg for their lives in the version of events where the player begins killing them, such protestations emerge as dialogue in the same way other enemies throughout the game might shout intimidating statements at the player. It is not clear that the player did not have to kill these doctors at any point.

Therefore this moment is potentially even more complex than the kind of decisions I analysed last section with regard to *Heavy Rain*, where the player would make a choice on behalf of a character only for the diegesis to then have the character explain their decision for reasons potentially distinct from that of the player's original reasoning. The following scenes of the game do not alter in any way regardless of the choice made as to whether to kill the doctors. The game does not 'know', so to speak, whether the player as Joel killed the medical staff or not; no line of dialogue and no cut-scene will alter in the moments that follow and their death is utterly irrelevant to the forward continuation of the game. If players are not aware that they had a choice here, then killing the medical staff can be written off as yet another action of Joel in rescuing Ellie. If we compare this killing to Arno's murders of various bar staff in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* in order to steal their wine (an incident discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two of this thesis), it is significant that players might not be hugely disturbed by killing these medical staff in *The Last of Us* versus the incoherency and ethically bizarre nature of *Assassin's Creed: Unity*'s transposition of normal game mechanics of killing guards to the protagonist's drunken low-point in the narrative. Is it just that rescuing Ellie represents a greater reason to kill other humans than for a barrel of wine, or is something more required here? The reason why so many players are likely to kill these medical staff, yet why this section of the game is still so emotionally powerful, is because it is *almost* entirely in keeping with the game's mechanics and

the diegetic characterisation of Joel so far. ‘Almost’, because although we have seen Joel kill those he views as threats before, we have not seen Joel kill anyone quite so innocent, yet at the same time their innocence is perhaps clouded by Ellie’s sudden appearance and the way in which one doctor tries to block the player’s way.

It is extremely easy and inconsequential to kill the medical staff and this action may seem like an appropriate response after hours of killing almost every other person you encounter, so the player does so, and so does Joel minutes later when he shoots Marlene in cold blood. Whether for good or ill, the player is ethically responsible in perpetuating Joel’s violence in a way that is perhaps more powerful for its unwitting nature and its lack of direct bifurcation of the game’s plot in any way. It is easy to make game choices that result in interesting dramatic outcomes for aesthetic rather than ethical reasons, out of an interest to see ‘what would happen if I did this?’ and to complete all versions of a story. Yet in decisions such as this where there is no direct outcome whatsoever, the only outcome of the decision is the making of the decision itself from the player’s causality and the way players might feel when they find out that they did not have to make that choice, if they ever do discover this. It is in such implicit decision-making and its equivalents in novels, perhaps, that the ethics of fiction can partially be located.

4. ‘You shall see yourself as you are’: Characterisation in George Orwell’s *1984*

All of the texts discussed thus far in this dissertation have either been video games, experimental prose fiction texts, or comparatively ‘normative’ set sequence novels such as *The Road* and *Enduring Love*, produced between the 1960s and the present day. I did not select these texts out of any purposeful attempt to make a historical argument, and I would argue that my methodology and theories are applicable to prior time periods, albeit requiring greater specificity over how hypothetical readers might respond to texts and differing values of prior historical moments. I selected these texts in part because they were the best type for their category – the experimental novels of Chapter One allowed me to comment on the contingency of identification upon sequence due to these texts’ experimentation with these elements; the stark and stripped-back *The Road* allowed me to analyse a relationship between just two characters with only a few interactions with others; and *Enduring Love*’s unprecedented level of obsession on Parry’s part and of an almost unbelievable disbelief on Clarissa’s part allowed me to foreground issues of identifying multiple characters and competing perspectives. Beyond the mechanics of each text, the contemporary or near-contemporary nature of many of the novels to the video games I analyse throughout my thesis allowed for a more natural comparison of tropes

and ethical issues, particularly those relating to women, parenting, the male gaze, and apocalyptic themes.

The final text of this final chapter is slightly more than a decade older than any of the others, yet it shares many of these tropes in a way that not only foreshadows their arrival in later fiction but sets the stage for them through its influence on its genre, on texts that use similar tropes, and indeed every-day politics and society: George Orwell's *1984*. By pushing further back in literary history, I intend in part to demonstrate the further applicability of my theory of characterisation to older texts, but in a way which does not require too much concentration on historical analysis, something which falls outside the scope of this thesis. However, primarily I use *1984* for many of the same reasons as my other texts, as not only does it share tropes with my previous examples, but it also acts as an excellent source text for exploring issues of reader causality in prose fiction, particularly in its use of the medium specificity of prose fiction – an aspect important to account for in a chapter that has thus far been partially concerned with the medium specificity of video games in terms of player causality emerging from explicit decisions made by players.

I will argue that *1984* manipulates reading conventions relating to narration in prose fiction and genre to lead the reader to construct the protagonist of *1984* in a way that is likely to be diegetically rewritten in the novel's concluding moments in a process broadly comparable to the manner in which *The Last of Us* and *Heavy Rain* 'rewrite' player construction of characters and their choices. Winston's use of certain words in his focalised narration may be constructed by readers according to their understanding of the words being used (something akin to a principle of minimal departure)¹⁹² that may be different from that which Winston intends in his own oppressive society or which may be taken for granted as true by the reader when Winston cannot live up to their standards in his later actions. This process is underscored on a thematic level through the manipulation and destruction of language itself in 'newspeak' and the attempt by the ruling classes of the novel's fictional society to eradicate certain words in order to destroy beliefs and values associated with them, mirroring what happens to Winston's characterisation and narration.

In *1984*, Winston Smith rebels against the oppressive Party through thought-crime first, then private writing, an illicit sexual relationship, and finally with promises of violence on behalf of a resistance movement. In each case, 'old-world' values are evoked by Winston in a way which

¹⁹² Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Possible Worlds', in 'the living handbook of narratology', ed. by Peter Hühn et al, (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2013), <<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/possible-worlds>> [accessed 2 September 2015]

even readers from 2015 may broadly align with their own pre-dystopian world, albeit in a manner that is likely to have been particularly politically urgent for British readers with recent European fascist and contemporary communist activity at the novel's publication in 1949. Elision of different historical and social positions is not necessarily a problem for my analysis here; such activity as that which I am engaged in is representative of the way in which readers are likely to apply their own understanding of the world and their own values to the use of language in a way that will almost certainly be distinct from any original author intention to some extent due to the limitations of language as necessarily 'corrupted' by the recipient.¹⁹³ However, as established throughout my previous chapters, the sequential logic of a text is likely to pattern readers in certain ways both on the micro level of style and the macro level of events and characterising statements. Therefore even if reader idiosyncrasy is likely to transform characterising details in a text, as I have argued in previous cases we can still discuss certain identifications as being likely in light of sequence. The same is true of *1984*. At each moment of rebellion and evocation of pre-dystopian values, Winston mentions his mother in some way. This repetition establishes a sequential patterning that leads the reader to expect rebellion whenever Winston's mother is mentioned, in a fashion that resembles the patterning I have described in *The Road*, *Enduring Love*, and *The Last of Us*.

Chapter Three of *1984*, for example, begins with the statement that 'Winston was dreaming of his mother'. The description of the dream suggests that the protagonist believes himself to be responsible for the death of his mother and sister:

[...] one of those dreams which, while retaining the characteristic dream scenery, are a continuation of one's intellectual life [...] His mother's memory tore at his heart because she had died loving him, when he was too young and selfish to love her in return, and because somehow, he did not remember how, she had sacrificed herself to a conception of loyalty that was private and unalterable.¹⁹⁴

Elsewhere in *1984*, dreams frequently act to foreshadow future plot events that Winston can have no knowledge of, such as Room 101 and 'the place where there shall be no darkness', but here in this first dream we see one of the first of many references to the past associated primarily with Winston's mother and his feeling of having betrayed her. For Winston, the past is not a happy place with a superior world to that of the Party, but instead a mausoleum of abject hunger and anarchy where his wish to preserve and glut himself on his family's food potentially killed the only people in the world who loved him and who he loved in return. This emotional

¹⁹³ This is not to argue for a model of fiction as communication – as I have argued in my previous chapters, inference of authority better accounts for reader engagement with narrative – yet neither would I argue that the real author's existence is without purpose for conceptual analyses of narrative.

¹⁹⁴ George Orwell, *1984* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 35. All further references to this edition will be given in the text.

tie in turn links Winston's family and only this family to pre-Party values: 'a conception of loyalty that was private and unalterable'. Moreover, the reader is likely to align Winston himself with such pre-Party values due to the emotional intensity with which he discusses such incidents even if there are hints he does not entirely believe in them, in a similar manner to Huck's potential alignment with possible reader belief in freeing slaves in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) despite (or because of) Huck's own belief he is going to go to hell as a result.¹⁹⁵ Just as with the frequent use of time jumps in *The Last of Us*, the letter/Clarissa-doubt chapters of Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*, and the cannibal encounters in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Winston's dreams and flashbacks regarding his mother and childhood throughout the novel act as a sequence that primes the reader for the novel's final arguments and encourages the reader to respond in certain ways to the novel's climax.

On virtually every occasion that Winston acts in a rebellious manner, the act follows Winston thinking of his mother in some way, and vice versa. Paradoxically, in the majority of these cases the seeds are also sown for Winston's final self-betrayal and the collapse of the reader's identification with a character we thought we knew. In this early dream of his mother, Winston places her 'private and unalterable' loyalty in opposition to the workings of the Party:

The thing that now suddenly struck Winston was that his mother's death [...] had been tragic and sorrowful in a way that was no longer possible. Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there was still privacy, love and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason [...] Such things, he saw, could not happen today. Today there was fear, hatred and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows. (p. 35)

For his very ability to have 'perceived' that tragedy is no longer possible, Winston might seem to rise above the intellectual constraints of his society with a 'dignity of emotion' and 'deep or complex sorrows'; if Winston can conceive of these concepts, readers can carry out their usual operations by recalling their real-life knowledge of what tragedy, emotion, love, and friendship are. Although the reader has no idea whether Winston means the same things by these words, readers interpret such language as being self-evident in the majority of texts without needing a great burden of psychological evidence. Limitations of publishing length, cognitive processing limitations in humans, and the nature of verbal prose leading to the flattening of reality into sentences word-by-word all contribute to this situation of words not 'properly' capturing the interiority of characters. However, the characterisation is not 'untrue' until diegetic statements contradict it; as Winston is not transformed in this manner until later in the text, there is nothing exactly incorrect about interpreting Winston in this manner at this point in the narrative. Due to both genre considerations and the likely reader belief that Winston supports old-world (and

¹⁹⁵ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. by Peter Coveney (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 283.

therefore ‘our’) values, readers are likely to consider Winston as the ‘hero’ rebelling against this regime and therefore ‘like us’.

This construction ultimately fails, however. Winston’s mother, we are told, had ‘a conception of loyalty that was private and unalterable’; Winston has no such conception. In the novel’s conclusion, Winston chooses Julia to suffer instead of himself – ‘Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don’t care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!’ (p. 329). He fails to maintain his love for Julia in the face of the horror of the rats of Room 101, where:

You think there’s no other way of saving yourself, and you’re quite ready to save yourself that way. You *want* it to happen to the other person. You don’t give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself. (p. 336).

Winston cries out for the torture and death he is about to receive to be given to his love Julia instead. Both Winston and the reader have believed throughout the novel that Room 101 contains ‘the worst thing in the world’ (p. 325). Many readers might be mistaken for thinking this refers to the rat torture that Winston so fears, but something deeper occurs here. Throughout the novel, Winston is indeed scared of rats, but often expresses this fear in particular after thinking of his mother or his impoverished childhood. This childhood experience represented more than just saving himself; Winston gorged on excessive chocolate in the process and thereby believes that he killed his mother to save his own skin. The worst thing in the world is not a rat. The worst thing in the world is Winston betraying those who love him once again, and in this moment Winston repeats the primal crime of his childhood.

Not only is Winston broken in a psychological sense by his betrayal of Julia, but also the reader’s sense of his character is utterly altered from the conception built up by the novel up to this point. My conclusion here resonates with but deviates from that of Phelan in his work *Reading People, Reading Plots*. Although Phelan notes the alignment of Winston’s mother with Julia, he concludes: ‘he violates something at the core of his values because it is at the core of his own existence: the feeling that he is alive because the woman who brought him into the world and loved him had sacrificed herself for him’.¹⁹⁶ On the contrary, I am arguing here that Winston did not violate his own values at all but rather ‘saw himself’ as he really is and as he was as a child – someone who had his entire life been sacrificing others for self-preservation, and who is nowhere near as noble as he thought. Phelan’s conclusion is symptomatic of the potential success of the novel’s initial emotional appeals, just as I concluded with Boyd’s reading of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* in Chapter Two. *1984* can be seen to encourage a

¹⁹⁶ Phelan, pp. 38-39.

sense of Winston as a potentially good man and closest character to the position of an active hero, only to reveal that much of said construction was in part aided and abetted by the reader's own likely inference and causal involvement in the character's formation (using 'real world' values and understandings of words as opposed to attempting to grasp the alien nature of the setting).

This tragic loss of self-image and realisation of his own base nature is threaded throughout the novel but may not be recognised by readers as such due to the potential success of the reader's elevation of Winston to hero-status. Repeatedly, the novel appeals to values of love and family that might convince the reader of Winston's potential to rise above this world alongside implicit suggestions of his complicity with his society's thinking. One of Winston's earliest transitions from thought-crime to actual rebellion against the state occurs, for example, in attempting to create a record of his feelings in contrast to the mutability of the party's records; however, this record quickly loses its structure with an attempt to capture mimetic dialogue. While watching war films, 'a woman down in the prole part of the house suddenly started kicking up a fuss and shouting they didnt oughter of showed it not in front of kids they didnt it aint right not in front of the kids' (sic) (p. 11). By reporting this incident Winston evokes the image of a more traditional kind of mothering relationship than that offered by those in the Party, and this in turn transitions into reflections on women in general: 'He did not know what had made him pour out this stream of rubbish. But the curious thing was that while he was doing so a totally different memory had clarified itself in his mind' (p. 11). Here Winston then thinks of his sexual desire for Julia and remarks 'he disliked nearly all women, and especially the young and pretty ones' whereas he feels 'deeply drawn to' O'Brien, a figure of false comfort to Winston throughout the novel all the way up until Winston's torture at the man's hands (pp. 12-13).

During the torture of Winston, O'Brien asks him why he believes the Party to have created such an apparently awful dystopia as that which the reader has learned about throughout the novel. Winston echoes the reader's own potential answer to this question, trained throughout the history of tragedy and the novel to believe that evil men are the heroes of their own stories, by suggesting that the Party might believe it is doing all this for the benefit of humankind. O'Brien intensifies Winston's torture after this suggestion, calling him 'stupid' (p. 301) and dismissing the 'hedonistic utopias that the old reformers imagined' (p. 306). O'Brien suggests instead that they have created this world to exercise power for its own sake without pretence:

Alone – free – the human being is always defeated. It must be so, because every human being is doomed to die, which is the greatest of all failures [...] in the future there will be no wives and no friends. Children will be taken from their mothers at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen [...] If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever. (pp. 303-07).

The individual is animalised, like an 'egg' from a 'hen'; only through overcoming death by abandoning the self in an everlasting mass collective can power for power's sake be maintained forever, O'Brien argues, specifically highlighting a relationship with 'mothers' in this regard. It is critical here that this final rebellion, leading as it has to Winston's torture in Room 101, has once again been preceded by thoughts of his mother and the values she represents.

Winston tells Julia, remembering his theft of food from his starving mother and sister as a child, that 'until this moment, I believed I had murdered my mother', believing it to have been a 'memory that he must have deliberately pushed out of his consciousness' (pp. 185-86). This guilt manifests itself in the moment of his decision to rebel, raising his mother to become a call for action:

Yet she had possessed a kind of nobility, a kind of purity, simply because the standards that she obeyed were private ones. Her feelings were her own, and could not be altered from outside. It would not have occurred to her that an action which is ineffectual thereby becomes meaningless. (p. 190).

Winston decides to rebel in a way that might similarly be 'ineffectual'; the result does not matter for him, with the act meaningful in and of itself in a way that ironically parallels the state's tautological justification of power for power's sake. Winston repeats throughout the novel that he is aware that Big Brother will inevitably discover his crime but continues regardless. O'Brien, masquerading as a resistance member, asks Winston a series of questions designed to test his allegiance to this fictional resistance movement. Among them, he asks:

'If, for example, it would somehow serve our interests to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face – are you prepared to do that?'
'Yes.' (pp. 199-200)

This statement is quickly moved past, present in a catalogue of other less problematic tests of allegiance. The text's pace is reminiscent of *The Last of Us* moving quickly past potentially problematic moments in its climactic events so that the reader/player is unlikely to be able to fully and explicitly consider the morality of each event. O'Brien claims to believe all previous regimes to have been in a state of denial about their aim towards power, yet how exactly is Winston's suggestion of 'ineffectual' action for its own sake and his willingness to 'throw sulphuric acid in a child's face' without hesitation any different from a pursuit for power? That Winston knows he will inevitably fail might be read by the reader as a heroic act – of fighting even though the battle is lost – but instead as the novel moves towards its conclusion Winston's action could be seen as involving a willingness to commit atrocities and throw lives away just

so that one can temporarily feel agency in an oppressive world. O'Brien directly reminds both Winston and the reader of this earlier sulphuric acid promise during his torture:

'If you are a man, Winston, you are the last man [...] And you consider yourself morally superior to us, with our lies and our cruelty?'

'Yes, I consider myself superior.'

O'Brien did not speak. Two other voices were speaking. After a moment Winston recognised one of them as his own. It was a sound-track of the conversation he had had with O'Brien, on the night when he had enrolled himself in the Brotherhood [...]

'You are the last man,' said O'Brien. 'You are the guardian of the human spirit. You shall see yourself as you are.' (pp. 309-10).

As with Tess and Joel's argument about being 'survivors' or 'shitty people' in *The Last of Us*, these statements explicitly posit ways of categorising and viewing the protagonist that readers have to contend with in some form in their construction of the narrative. Is Winston morally superior? Winston's private emotional discourse and criticism of the way in which his world is run has likely been, up until this point, relatable to any reader who likewise judges its world as hellish. Moreover, in his attempt to fulfil the narrative promise of rebellion suggested throughout the novel, Winston has likely achieved some level of allegiance with the reader, just as the father of *The Road* or Joe and Parry in *Enduring Love* do so regardless of their other flaws. Yet in this instance, O'Brien does not necessarily say that Winston is *not* morally superior, he just provides evidence instead in reminding both the reader and Winston of earlier events. When O'Brien then repeats his claims, 'You are the last man [...] You are the guardian of the human spirit', the meaning might be changed in the eyes of the reader; O'Brien is arguing that humanity is self-deluded as to its ethical superiority and that the reader might likewise have been deluded in their support of Winston. When O'Brien therefore says 'You shall see yourself as you are', he speaks both to the character and to the reader constructing him. The reader sees Winston choose himself over Julia, and in this moment the reader's view of the character is likely to fundamentally change.

Just as Winston cannot withstand the rats, neither can the reader's likely sense of continuity between Winston pre- and post- torture be sustained, something which is emphasised and partially obscured by the novel's time jump forwards. This jump occurs in a similar manner to the time jumps of *The Last of Us*, ending the prior section with the exact moment of Winston's betrayal (not just of Julia but of himself and more importantly the reader's likely view of him) but skipping to some future time point after Winston's release. Not only might the reader be looking for some signs of the pre-torture version of Winston for characterising purposes, to recoup the lost character development not shown to us due to the time jump, but so too does the narrative play with this question as to whether Winston is 'still the same'. As I have argued, throughout the novel Winston thinks of his mother just before he rebels, thinking of how he had

betrayed her and his sister. The same occurs in this section, potentially and even unconsciously priming the reader that a similar rebellious act may occur due to this conditioning throughout the narrative, yet there is a crucial difference here:

His tiny sister, too young to understand what the game was, had sat propped up against a bolster, laughing because the others were laughing. For a whole afternoon they had all been happy together, as in his earlier childhood.

He pushed the picture out of his mind. It was a false memory. (pp. 340-41)

Not only does Winston actively push away the memory as ‘false’ in a similar manner to the way in which he rewrites history for the government as part of his occupation in this world, but even beforehand the memory was highly positive and pleasant, free of the pain of all previous instances.

Likewise, when Winston meets Julia with so little emotion they could almost be strangers, the reader is likely to persistently wonder if there is any sign of the prior love the two characters expressed before their capture, but instead there is a melancholy dissection of what they did to one another – ‘You don’t give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself’ (p. 336) – followed by their parting as virtually strangers. All that Winston cares about now is Big Brother, with connotations of a replacement mother-figure or even lover in the ‘loving breast’:

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath that dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother (p. 342).

There is a terrifying doubling of stance here; the reader is invited to take Winston at his word that he loves Big Brother not just due to the prior meetings of this chapter suggesting his broken nature but due to the impassioned love here, reminiscent in its expression to poetry of lovers and their complaints. At the same time, despite Winston’s own evocation of prior old-world values likely having been taken at face-value throughout the novel by the reader, the values expressed in these ending sentences run contrary to the reader’s own likely feelings here towards the abominable Party.

The character we are reading about has the same history and name as the Winston we have generated throughout the text, but the values now expressed and even some of the writing style conflicts with the reader’s likely identification prior to this point. When the novel therefore says ‘The struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself’, the novel makes explicit the reader’s conflict over the multiple versions of Winston likely constructed up until this point. In previous chapters I have argued that we identify with all characters in texts out of necessity and

to varying extents as part of the process of generating and understanding characters from texts, conceptualising each character's perspective even when multiple characters appear and interact. In analysing the games of this chapter, I have shown how this process of identification is complicated by the player's own causal involvement in making explicit choices in games but also interpretative and emotional choices in response to set-sequence narratives, and I have suggested that these choices can be anticipated and manipulated by such texts. *1984* likewise implicates the reader's causal activity in likely identifying Winston as holding certain values, matching to some extent Winston's possible self-image suggested by O'Brien as 'the guardian of the human spirit', only to dismantle this in its latter moments in a way that triggers all prior emotional associations with Winston's mother, rebellion, and the sacrifice of others throughout the text.

This shift in the final moments of *1984* sets up the conclusion to my thesis and the introduction of my final concept – that of each character itself representing a multitude. The reader may believe that Winston is a complete victim of his regime, but he only rebelled after all because the Party wanted him to, watching him and manipulating him this entire time in a ritualistic tragedy and conversion into a model citizen. The text's triggering of multiple prior details of diegetic characterisation prevents its ending from being rejected as 'unlike' Winston entirely, for the character we see may contradict some prior narrative details but coheres enough to prior moments that readers can see he is the same man. It is this multiplicity of the same character, and the negotiation the reader must engage in to make multiple versions fit, wherein I will argue in my conclusion that much of the ethical and unethical potential of fiction lies. Not only do we identify with every character in a text, but every character becomes *many characters* in the process of identification, elided and indistinct from one another just as any present moment is indistinct to its perceiver, the present moment passing as soon as one attempts to frame it. Like a flipbook of images flipping from page to page and forming a smooth animation, a character is a procession, a multitude, the child of book and reader.

CONCLUSION: A Theory of Identification and Ethics

In my final chapter, I explored how *1984* involves diegetic rewriting of Winston's character – the reader might believe him to be representative of the 'human spirit' and a hero but in the final moments of the text he is revealed to have not necessarily been the man we thought he was, and even beyond this he is further transformed through his torture into abandoning much of his prior apparently noble behaviour. This revelation of a protagonist as holding different motivations and values to those a reader/player believes them to have can be found also in Scott Shelby in *Heavy Rain* and the revelation that he is a murderer, yet the incident is distinct for the fact that Winston only commits his crime of trying to sacrifice Julia at the end of the text and is indeed partially altered by the experience into someone who loved Big Brother, as opposed to committing crimes literally throughout the text. *The Last of Us* perhaps represents a closer comparative example for *1984* with Joel's murder of Marlene at the end of the game potentially representing for the player a line being crossed, an action that transforms the player's view of Joel's character. As I recounted in the previous chapter, Joel then lies to Ellie in the car on the way back but finds such lying far more difficult than murder, suggesting a scale of values where his relationship with Ellie is prized above all and creating an emotionally complex situation for a player who might sympathise with Joel for this lying but condemn him for his other actions.

In the concluding moments of *The Last of Us*, players find themselves controlling Ellie instead of Joel, a switch that has only occurred before when Joel himself was physically incapacitated. Here, however, the shift reinforces distance from Joel and encourages consideration from afar of his actions, with the game giving the player time to do so in a way it might not have done with the player's potential unthinking execution of medical staff earlier in the game. Although the player does not control Ellie's dialogue, the player is invited to share her perspective in having to physically keep up with Joel yet being unable to move as fast. In the final conversation, Ellie's dialogue style alters from her usually energetic and verbose speech and Joel's dialogue suddenly becomes quite talkative and willing to discuss a past he has been evasive about it earlier in the narrative. This following exchange concludes the game:

Joel: Well, looks like we're walking. Should be a straight shot from here.

Ellie: Alright.

Joel: Actually kinda pretty, ain't it?

Ellie: Yeah.

Joel: Alright. Now watch your head going through. [*The pair move past a barbed wire fence*]

Ellie: Here... got it.

Joel: Oh... Feelin' my age now. Hmpf. Don't think I ever told you, but Sarah and I used to take hikes like this. I think, ah... I think the two of you would've been good

friends. Think you really would've liked her. I know she woulda liked you.

Ellie: I bet I would've.

[They emerge above the town Jackson where Joel's brother has founded a safe haven]

Joel: Wow. Look down here. Just a little bit further now. Shit. Here, I got you. Gimme your hand.

At this moment the player must select a button press to be lifted up by Joel in the final action of the game. Throughout this sequence, the player is simultaneously reminded of all the experiences they underwent as Joel/player combined and therefore the psychological justification for Joel's behaviour due to having lost his previous daughter Sarah and gaining Ellie, yet at the same time possibly gladdened by Joel's apparent healing inasmuch as he is now able to discuss Sarah in a positive way, 'I think you two would've been good friends. Think you really would've liked her. I know she woulda liked you'. At the same time, these words are troubling in light of what actions we know Joel has performed to achieve the possibility of such words being spoken – that he murdered a woman just in case she might follow them, and has debatably ridden humanity of one of its only chances to be healed. Joel's happiness and Ellie's life has cost the world.

In Ellie's uncharacteristically muted assent, the player's own potential response is mirrored and her disbelief in Joel's story prefigured:

Joel: Alright, come on.

Ellie: Hey, wait. Back in Boston – back when I was bitten – I wasn't alone. My best friend was there. And she got bit too. We didn't know what to do. So... She says 'Let's just wait it out. Y'know, we can be all poetic and just lose our minds together.' I'm still waiting for my turn.

Joel: Ellie --

Ellie: Her name was Riley and she was the first to die. And then it was Tess. And then Sam.

Joel: None of that is on you.

Ellie: No, you don't understand.

Joel: I struggled for a long time with survivin'. And you – no matter what, you keep finding something to fight for. Now, I know that's not what you want to hear right now, but it's --

Ellie: Swear to me. Swear to me that everything you said about the Fireflies is true.

[There's a short pause]

Joel: I swear.

Ellie: *[pause]* Okay. *[Smash cut to a black screen, then credits and music]*

In the final seconds of the game Ellie reveals a prior hitherto unknown characterising detail of great significance, explaining her motivation as stemming from her friend Riley's death and inviting questions as to whether she is experiencing survivor's guilt as Joel suggests or whether Ellie was positively motivated to help stop this cycle of death through her unique immunity. Throughout my thesis I have explored several 'self-definitional' moments such as this in various texts where characters directly express opinions and define themselves or one another that act as

flashpoints for decision-making on the part of players/readers. Joel completes his emotional struggle throughout the text by talking about himself with Ellie as a proxy: 'I struggled for a long time with survivin'. And you – no matter what, you keep finding something to fight for. Now, I know that's not what you want to hear right now, but it's –'. Ellie interrupts, however, by changing the nature of the question the player is being asked and by implication asking the player to determine Joel's goodness and whether his action was ethically correct:

Ellie: Swear to me. Swear to me that everything you said about the Fireflies is true.

[There's a short pause]

Joel: I swear.

Ellie: *[pause]* Okay. *[Smash cut to a black screen, then credits and music]*

From this scene it could be inferred that Ellie knows that Joel is lying and has in one sense betrayed their relationship through this lie and dismissal of Ellie's agency even as in another sense it reveals the ethical sacrifice Joel has made on Ellie's behalf to keep her safe, a sacrifice Ellie might also recognise as such. That the game so quickly cuts to black with 'The Last of Us' as a logo upon the screen ties this moment to the title's connotations not only of the last human beings but also the last of characters' individual humanity and emotional reservoirs, that these kinds of situations are what characters have been reduced to.

What happens in the above moments, when Ellie revealed characterisation the player could not have known prior to this moment and where Joel progressed forward with characterisation different to his prior incarnations? Throughout my thesis I have raised the idea of identification being contingent upon sequence, but what are the ontological implications for the existence of characters, if it is in the specifically fictional nature of such processes that we are to find their ethics? Earlier in my thesis I also discussed Richard Walsh's argument in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* that using mimetic representational models of character as our criteria for emotional investment and emotional response does not make sense conceptually speaking – we feel emotion in response to phrases and values before a character has been fully established in a mimetic model, and what is a character but the values and ideas attached to him or her? Instead, Walsh argues that although readers may form emotional responses to each element of the web of values relating to each character, the reader's sense that they feel emotion for an individual rather than in response to values associated within an individual emerges as a by-product of interpretation, not as the beginning of the chain. As an ongoing argument throughout my thesis, I have contended that the reader's belief that they are responding to individuals is not so easily discarded, and that this tendency of readers can be used to account for the ability of fictional arguments to achieve reader agreement and investment to a greater degree than factual arguments. Even if we do differentiate between what is actually happening in our experiences with narrative and what readers *think* happens as the *product* of narrative experiences, the fact

that readers think certain things occur in the narrative experience can still be indicative of important parts of fictional stories' effects. Here, in light of my analysis of sequence, control, multiplicity, and causality throughout my thesis, I would like to extend my initial response to value-driven theories of character further.

Characters may emerge from a primordial soup of values and ideas throughout a text, generated by the reader as I have shown in relation to *1984* and other novels, yet ontologically they still have a level of unified existence inasmuch as the reader considers such values and ideas as related to a particular individual at a particular point in the story, or else narratives would be nonsensical. However, nothing about what I have argued here necessitates the continuity of such unified characters from moment to moment in the face of diegetic rewriting of player/reader identification of characters. How much is too much of a shift before a character is no longer the same 'person' if characters are not 'real' people at all? The situation is even clearer in novels where only pronouns and proper nouns bind characterising details together as opposed to games where other audio-visual stimuli such as character models and voice actors hold characterising details together.

In *The Road*, for example, I have argued that the first half features events that repeatedly authenticate the father's sense of threat and mistrust towards strangers only for the novel to reverse this view in the second half by suggesting the father to be incorrect, even though the world itself appears to have changed. How can this incoherency be accounted for in ontological terms when so few people appear to notice it that George Monbiot suggests the novel can 'save the world' and Clive Sinclair claims that 'some deep sympathy' makes the father and son 'human and knowable to us, causes us to care almost beyond bearing about their fates, and so makes us read on compulsively for fear of what might happen to them. And us'? And on the other hand, what is going on in the minds of players when in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* the hitherto heroic Arno murders civilians to steal wine in a misjudged game mission yet the diegesis provides no explanation for the sudden shift in values and indeed forgets this troubling incident even occurred, with the aforementioned reviewer Andrew Webster trying to unify various elements of Arno's personality and concluding that the storytelling is poor:

Arno has basically no memorable personality traits, aside from the fact that he's a sociopathic killer. There's a scene where he kills multiple people just so he can steal some wine and have a drink. Afterwards, he doesn't express remorse: he's just mad someone stole his watch while he was passed out from drinking. He's an incredibly unlikable lead. Of course, storytelling has never been *Assassin's Creed's* strong suit.

The developers are likely making no deep point about Arno's ethics, but have likely simply forgotten to explain it and not considered the effects of having such an incident in the larger

narrative. Yet this example of Arno's behaviour is crucial for the matter at hand in this thesis, for Arno is not some radically different creature from the Father in *The Road* – both are fictional characters constructed in broadly similar ways, and 'good' or 'bad' writing does not necessarily change what exactly they are but rather how the reader/viewer feels about them.

The only reason Arno's characterisation is problematic is because the narrative failed to provide sufficient explanation as to why Arno engaged in actions with values utterly unlike other instances of characterisation. If characters are ontologically-speaking collections of values and ideas interpreted by the player/reader in various stances and frames of reference, usually united as all referring to the same fictional being, then something has gone wrong in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. There are two different Arnos here, one who engages in the majority of the narrative and the other who seems to replace him for this mission. *The Road* is far better at concealing its perspective shift for the more gradual transition between characterising details than is found in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. In *The Road*, it is more the world around the protagonists than the protagonists themselves who change, and moreover the novel uses such mechanics as prolepsis and comedy to ease the transition for the reader and hide the seams of the shift.

All characters are to some extent multitudes in this manner, loosely defined collections of values and ideas tied to a name, face, or voice that constantly shift throughout a text to alter the person we are reading about from moment to moment. No character is 'the same person' at two points of a text for they are not flesh but words, sounds, images, or code. Characters are only held together by the reader's acceptance that two versions refer to the same person, and therefore, as characters are mental constructions by readers they gain ontological reality only according to this ongoing acceptance of a text's authority to modify characters from moment to moment in further diegetic detail. The sudden extensive modification of character is even a popular literary device in this manner in the form of the 'twist' of such texts as *The Sixth Sense* (1999) revealing that Bruce Willis's character Malcolm Crowe has been dead all along or that, for example, Scott Shelby in *Heavy Rain* is the Origami killer and not a detective hired by the victims' families. Whatever devices promote authority for a particular reader can bind together multiple versions of a character into one being, whether invoking the stylistic weaving together of moments or even the authority of events occurring in one book as opposed to stories by multiple authors. For example, as I suggested earlier in this thesis, readers may 'disagree' with a new story featuring Bruce Wayne using a gun due to prior stories featuring this character establishing an identification wherein he would not use the weapon type that killed his parents. In such a case, authority is clearly located by reader outside of any one specific author and has become something idiosyncratic to particular readers based on their own values and prior

narrative experiences; new iterations of Bruce Wayne are only accepted if these fit such personal expectations which may differ from reader to reader.

What I am arguing here is something similar in theory to Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', in which authorities over texts have no innate power to fix interpretation and where the various ways of viewing a text are simultaneously valid. However, I am not suggesting that readers suddenly stop thinking of characters as unified beings just because they exist as multiple versions constantly shifting throughout a text. To do this would be to throw away the purpose of characterisation in an attempt to explain how it works. Instead, I intend to promote more in-depth analysis of the complexities of fiction. I do so by arguing that readers are manipulated by textual sequence and style to construct characters in certain ways and to accept the diegetic alteration of character throughout a text as part of their identification; readers identify *all* characters in this sense. We can define such identification as building an internal and external image of everything relating to a character in an attempt to comprehend their existence as a unit implicitly postulated by a text. As part of this process the reader's emotional engagement with narrative is likely to lead from inference and acceptance of textual authority to a narrative wish for certain events to occur for each character. To account fully for all these elements but to discover further narrative processes, to account for historical difference, and to consider the way in which different groups of readers might respond in different ways would in many senses be far beyond the scope of any individual thesis, let alone any one work by one literary critic or theorist. Therefore in this thesis I have attempted to reason out with the use of a comparative analysis of novels and video games some logical likelihoods for what these processes might involve rather than attempting to definitively provide a final word upon any of them.

My initial theory holds identification to be ubiquitous for readers in response to all characters in a text, involving the harnessing of multiple versions of a character together along a given textual sequence and which is indelibly altered by the reader's own causal influence. If my theory is accurate, what then for an ethics of reading? I have proposed already that this 'bizarre' ontology of fictional characters should be embraced when considering the ethics of reading, as opposed to being dismissed in favour of either pretending fictional events fit real-life standards or that they do not matter ethically at all. To answer this question, I will conclude by revisiting the arguments of my introduction and the 'empathy-altruism' hypothesis, in light of the account of identification, character, and sequence I have provided in this thesis. Suzanne Keen's definition of narrative empathy in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* describes the process as 'the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition'. If rephrased in the terms of my theory of identification, this definition would read: identification is 'the imposition of reader

causality/feeling combined with the absorption of diegetic rewriting of all characters in a text on a moment-by-moment basis with new versions negotiated in contract with inferred authority'. Keen's definition of narrative empathy uses the language of 'sharing', 'perspective-taking', and 'another's situation', revealing her implicit bias as to characters somehow being 'real' which is unhelpful in exploring a process that already involves a confusion of the 'real' and fictional; in my definition of identification, I intend to demonstrate the complex and voluntary power dynamics into which readers enter.

My prime focus throughout much of this thesis has been on issues of fictional misogyny in this regard, and it is here that my definition of identification can find initial value. My argument has in a sense gone full circle from my initial analysis of *The Unfortunates*, where I argued that although characters are fictional and therefore no real person is affected by reader construction of character, processes of identification still draw upon and evoke understandings of the world that are, in 'real life' senses, still ethical acts. Given its definition as a category-based attack eliding individual difference between women, I asked whether misogyny should be evaluated ethically by the harm it perpetuates towards a category. I argued that if gender categories are at the very least partially performance and culture-based, then fictional misogyny could be seen as deontologically wrong unless we impose an arbitrary 'fictional' caveat or readers abdicate responsibility by saying they were forced to recreate misogynist behaviour in reading the text. According to my theory of identification, however, if the imposition of reader causality and the acceptance of inferred authority are crucial for moment-by-moment changes to characterisation being accepted, then why should a misogynistic characterisation be accepted as making sense if, say, Arno's characterisation in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* as murdering people for wine is rejected as bad writing and 'non-canonical' to the rest of the game's events?

One answer to this question of whether a misogynistic characterisation should be accepted is to radically refuse to continue reading if we infer a text to have lent its authority to a misogynistic characterisation as opposed to featuring misogyny only to critique it, as other texts might. To read or not to read becomes an important ethical question if my theory of identification is correct; this is because of the way in which reading usually represents not only obedience to inferred power structures emerging during a reading but also the simultaneous involvement of the reader's own causality making up parts of the character responded to. This combination means, logically speaking, that if someone continues to read a problematic text then in some scenarios obedience could alter or betray someone's ethical values in that moment. For example, if a reader does not notice any misogyny occurred in such a text, then the imposition of these values onto the existing identification of characters makes sense according to the reader's own causal involvement in identification and therefore the reader has engaged in an act

of misogyny. If the reader condemns the misogynistic example yet keeps reading, what then? Authority in a text can be strained without the entire text being rejected – one can ‘discard’ Arno the wine-murderer in *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* but accept each subsequent instance of characterisation without claiming the whole game’s narrative to have been a masterpiece. Indeed, I argued earlier in my thesis that the reader’s generation of working models of what characters would or would not do can be likened to the physics concept of potential energy where exerting force upon an object will cause potential energy to be stored based on position only to be released, such as drawing a bowstring to release it. I argued that so too can reader generation of characters in prose novels be seen as a potential energy version of the control seen in video games, an emotional wish-based investment in what characters themselves might choose to do and with the text ‘firing’ or ‘misfiring’ according to whether later-encountered characterising events succeed in either fitting reader expectations or persuading the reader to adopt new ones. Therefore it could be argued here that such moments just ‘misfire’, are rejected, and new ones accepted. Why would someone want to read a book they know to be misogynist? Is it because the value is not enough of a sin on the part of the text’s authority for the entire structure to collapse for some readers, something like a white person uneasily sitting at the front of a segregated bus with a mixture of token objection and a wilful attempt to move on from having noticed it? Indeed, if it is often poorly written texts that are rejected by readers rather than skilful texts such as *The Road*, do many readers value aesthetics above ethics when it comes to fiction?

Two main objections could be raised to this idea that continuing to follow a text’s authority after being invited to construct unethical characterisation is itself wrong. Feminist readers, for example, might continue reading such a text in order to critique and understand the view behind the text as a whole – how can one discuss and write about misogyny if its manifestations are not understood, and how can one understand if one does not follow the steps of a process? A case could be made that potential feminist allies might read such texts in order to realise their own latent misogyny and work on their behaviour, yet if a text’s authority does not itself condemn or make obvious its attacks on women, then are such individuals likely as a matter of course to have a feminist awakening? The only other case that could be made is that if we were to refuse to read texts that provoke misogynistic characterisation we would lose out on the value of the canon of literature, of the many texts that are superbly written, that make other positive ethical points, or which are fundamental to the development of latter literature. All of these are potentially valid points, yet how many texts are studied because they were influential in their time period or moralistically present positive ethical points without having a concomitant aesthetic quality of being well written or stylistically clever? Although some might not like them, how many texts considered by the majority of people to be terrible are studied in

academia? Such texts are studied either because the text is in all other respects excellent or because, as is perhaps more likely, in the same way as *The Road* conceals its ethical shift, so too do many of these texts conceal misogyny or other elements through their style and sequence. Are good novels therefore perhaps quite dangerous, provoking as they might a reader to not recognise a shift in characterisation as problematic and therefore to implicitly accept such values? To reiterate here, I am not discussing texts that just feature misogyny and other unethical values but texts which support the ontological validity of such opinions as being true of women or of whatever other value or group raised.

In an analogous sense to my theorising here about whether we should read or not read certain texts, in my analysis of *Hopscotch* in Chapter One I discussed those who suggest refraining from identification. Spivak warns against the colonizing powers of identification and how we should apprehend the Other *as* Other without judgement or invasion, rather than attempting to locate ourselves within that Other, reversing the liberal humanist assumption that entering into another's self might be ethically valuable – that same appreciation of otherness that characterized much of reader response and reception theory's ethical turn. However, the warning may prove undesirable, as I quoted from Bart Moore-Gilbert earlier in this thesis:

An insistence on the irreducible alterity and muteness of the subaltern, one might argue, paralyzes not just the subaltern, but the would-be ally of the subaltern – who is left in the double-bind of being required to show solidarity without in any way “selfing” that Other or “assimilating” her to the degree that solidarity perhaps inevitably demands [...] if its account of subaltern alterity and muteness were true, then there would be nothing but the West (and the native elite, perhaps) to write about.

As I argued in Chapter One, if we consider that Spivak applies such ethics to our response to literary characters in her theories as well as real individuals, the situation becomes even stranger, as in her analysis of the ‘literary impulse: to imagine the other who does not resemble the self’ where a female character's focalizing possibilities are foreclosed in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*. To revisit these arguments with my theory of identification, these characters already involve the reader's own causality out of necessity and can never reach this pure state that such deconstructionists ironically seem to argue for. Feminist readers of fiction might be justified in continuing a misogynist identification for political purposes because, by necessity, such readers must pretend and engage in a consciously creative act to make sense of the characters as quite different from such reader's own view of the world. Other readers – perhaps even male feminist allies – might not be so justified in engaging in such for they have never existed within such an oppressed group and cannot know what having to construct such characters is like or what such experiences are like and must therefore necessarily caricature their real-life equivalents to some extent.

Might it on some level therefore be unethical to identify with characters outside of one's group due to a necessary lack of requisite true understanding of their real-life equivalents (and therefore stop reading the majority of texts)? For example, Robert Eaglestone's analysis of identification of non-Holocaust survivors with accounts of survivors suggests that:

[...] survivor testimony opens a problem. We who come after the Holocaust and know about it only through representations are frequently and with authority told that it is incomprehensible. However, the representations seem to demand us to do exactly that, to comprehend it, to grasp the experiences, to imagine the suffering through identifying with those who suffered. And readers and audiences do identify strongly with testimony accounts.¹⁹⁷

Even in non-fictional cases such as this, identification cannot fail to occur as a characterising process despite the reality of the people who recorded their experiences. Eaglestone argues various positions that are echoed in my own such as that identification is multi-faceted and often over-looked, but, as my thesis has argued, I would go one step further and claim identification is logically necessary. The ethics of engagement with non-fiction in this manner are in a general sense beyond the scope of this thesis albeit important as an area of further exploration, yet I want to open up some brief possibilities here. No real individual person is necessarily affected by the reader's identification here because the person is no longer real at the point of being recorded into text and then characterised moment by moment; the reader may feel differently about what they are doing (and such a feeling is nevertheless important) and the original author of the text may be affected if they learn of responses, but in the moment of identification itself the ontology of character is broadly the same as fiction. Restricting the argument to this moment alone, is it wrong for readers to engage in my formula of identification – 'the imposition of reader causality/feeling combined with the absorption of diegetic rewriting of all characters in a text on a moment-by-moment basis with new versions negotiated in contract with inferred authority' – if the reader's causality and judgement of the inferred authority cannot have true understanding of that group's experiences or a right to apply their own causality with all the dangers that entails?

I would argue that many of these potential cases for ethical and unethical engagement with fictional texts could meet the demandingness objection of ethics to some extent albeit in reverse, that readers must stop reading an inordinate amount of fiction in order to fulfil their ethical duties. If identification is ubiquitous, as I have argued it is, then arguments that suggest we should refrain from identifying with Others might seem impracticable. However, it must be acknowledged that the way in which these theorists have used and will likely continue to use the

¹⁹⁷ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, repr. 2008), p. 19.

term 'identification' carries with it competing and often narrower senses than the overarching definition of the process that I have created throughout this thesis in relation to reader construction of fictional characters. I do not contest this; these theorists are indeed discussing identification just as I have been doing, but I would argue that there are unnecessary and unhelpful limitations in prior usage that obfuscate many possibilities for analysis such as reader identification with *all* characters in texts, for example. Therefore although I disagree with the notion that we should refrain from identification with fictional characters due to the logical impracticality of such refraining, such prior theories are still highly useful for extending my arguments particularly in terms of the ethical discussion in which theory has often debated narrower definitions of identification.

The debate over identification in literature has been characterised by many as standing between 'empathy-altruism' (the belief that narrative empathy will lead to ethical action) and views that oppose identification as unethical or as an inferior method of responding to fiction, as I explored in greater depth in the introduction to this thesis. If I were to attempt to integrate positions antagonistic to identification into my theory of character, an initial question could be posed: what if identification *per se* is not ethically problematic, but instead certain ways of identifying might involve unethical action? Identification in response to fiction could not be unethical without damning the entirety of fiction; such damnation is certainly an open possibility but beyond the scope of this current project to prove one way or the other. At the very least, it could be posited that certain ways of using one's own causal power in constructing characters and one's own acceptance of textual power structures without question can lead to unethical positions on the part of identifiers. Readers should not necessarily stop viewing characters as unified entities – this would defeat the point of the concept – yet such elements as an awareness of characters' contingency upon sequence, the reader's role in inferring and obeying authorities in texts, the easy switch from narrative prediction to wishes for events to occur, and negotiation between multiple characters can all be carried out with an awareness of what these processes ontologically lead towards and the distinction between such events and reality. Readers' necessary use of their own causality, their personality, the experiences that have made them who they are, and the values that they hold in everyday life – all of these elements can provide an opportunity for appreciating what one cannot know yet the simultaneous and human yearning to know nevertheless.

This aforementioned awareness of the inability to truly know the experiences of *real* alterity as opposed to that of fictional characters can provide ethical lessons for life outside of fiction, yet here I do not mean to repeat the conclusions of prior criticism in locating the ethical power of fiction outside of fiction itself, more to show how the reader of fiction does not suddenly stop

being a real human being or acting with similar values when reading fiction. This awareness helps the reader to avoid acting *unethically* in their response to fiction, but it does not provide a basis for positively ethical behaviour, that holy grail of the empathy-altruism hypothesis and all related theories. Does literature just have little effect other than slight personal pleasure or pain in such a case?

I will raise one final example as a possibility for locating such ethics. In Episode 3 of the game series *Life is Strange* (2015),¹⁹⁸ the playable protagonist and teenager Max Caulfield attempts to save her friend Chloe's father from a car accident by using her recently discovered time-manipulation power to revisit the moments before he left for his fateful journey. This fateful car journey will not only lead Chloe's father to die but Chloe to become depressed, be expelled from school with low grades and criminal behaviour, and to Chloe's mother marrying a man who slaps Chloe across the face. In the alternate time-line where the player has been able to prevent Chloe's father from dying, however, the butterfly effect of alternate events occurring leads Chloe to become paralysed after her own accident as a teenager, entirely bedridden, in constant pain, and likely to die herself soon due to her worsening condition. Although it is not the player's explicit choice to have gone back in time to save Chloe's father (this is compulsory), the player has likely been engaged in the optional rewriting history for often spurious reasons prior to this as a gameplay mechanic to alter bad decisions in gameplay or to help Max in social situations at school, implicitly supporting the idea of time travel. As both Chloe and Max mourn the loss of Chloe's father and hate Chloe's stepfather, the player is unlikely to have any major reason to believe saving Chloe's father to have been a bad idea and are thus likely to support it as a narrative wish. Therefore the player may feel as terrible as Max does about this alternative history where Chloe is paralysed, even more so due to the unspoken but implicit knowledge in much of what Max says in her thoughts and questions that Max will need to revert history to the original timeline and choose Chloe's life over that of her father, killing him once again. At the end of this section, Chloe tells Max she is in a great deal of pain, that she knows she will die soon, and says she wants the positive memories of them watching a film together to be her last, requesting that Max/the player turn up her drip so that she will slip into a sleep and die. The player is given three options – agree, disagree, or 'I don't know'.

During my own play-through, I agreed to kill Chloe and respect her autonomy over her own death, not only calling upon my real-world values as a player but having been emotionally affected and even feeling partially responsible due to my own involvement in Max's diegetic construction via my identification with her character. The choice does not matter either way, as shortly afterwards Max reverts the timeline to its original status where Chloe is once more alive

¹⁹⁸ *Life is Strange*, dir. by Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015).

and her father is once more dead without anyone but Max knowing anything had ever happened. However, the fact that this choice has no apparent ethical effect lends the moment its ethical poignancy. Throughout this thesis I have referred to Žižek's claims regarding video games, which I will repeat here for reference:

Consider the interactive computer games some of us play compulsively, games which enable a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It's all too easy to assume that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace in order to escape from a dull, impotent reality.

Not only does this example from *Life is Strange*, with its two female and potentially LGBT teenage protagonists, utterly disprove Žižek's assumptions regarding games involving 'beating up other men and violently enjoying women', but so too does it allow us to potentially get closer to the truth of the matter regarding the ethics of games.

Žižek asks 'Isn't it precisely because I am aware that this is 'just a game' that in it I can do what I would never be able to in the real world?', articulating 'the perverse core of my personality which, because of ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in real life'. I would argue that the ethics of games lies in their bizarre ontology, not in a simulacra of real life, and that rather than trying to view games just as a second-rate version of reality, it is much more challenging and provocative to embrace their fictitious nature as providing an ethics linked to real-world standards but simultaneously involving other unique standards. Games, as with much of fiction, are utterly repeatable; novels can be read again and again, characters once dead temporarily alive in a way that renders fiction reading a kind of time travel in a way that cannot be achieved in real life. In games, not only is this element of repeatability present but so too in many games is a bifurcation of plot, where although actions seem to have ethical consequences these are inherently temporary as the game can always be replayed so that different events occur, inviting a whole host of other stances and motivations towards character construction in deciding what to do.

In *Life is Strange*'s euthanasia choice and *The Last of Us*'s choice of whether to kill the doctors, these moments are ethically significant precisely because we have no higher aesthetic power telling us the outcome of the decision in a clearly defined way. The choice is irrelevant to the game's programming, but extremely relevant to the player's own sense of character construction. If game choices rely on feedback from the game's systems, these instances involve little such acknowledgement that plot-defining choices occurred and do not allow the player to transpose the emotional consequences upon any diegetic rewriting of decision-making in the game as final responsibility lies with the player's own causality alone, even if the player has been 'trained' by the text to make a particular choice in some circumstances.

It is in this implicit manner that readers make choices in novels without explicit feedback from the text. If readers then read without thinking consciously about the processes they are undertaking – if they engage in what Vladimir Nabokov calls in *Pale Fire* ‘brutish routine acceptance’ of the ‘miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing’ – readers may not realise their own responsibility and choices they make in constructing fictional characters from novels. Readers may not know they had any choices at all, believing their interpretation of the text, their sense of what happened and who these people were to be self-evident and correct even if many acknowledge their readings to be at least slightly different from those of others. People talk as if something is ‘done’ to them when reading fiction, as if they are passive victims or recipients of its message. Readers are, on the contrary, active, as others have shown before and as I have tried to show here, and this is why our choices matter ethically even if no other real people are affected by our constructions of character.

One real person, and one real person only is affected by what we do to fictional people – the reader of the text. Identifying characters involves the reader’s own causality, values, and agreement to authority, but the reader is not unaffected by such involvement. Each character is not a prison cell in the reader’s mind, totally segmented from anything else the reader thinks. Characters exist only in our minds, but the full implications of this are not obvious. Fictional characters are, in a sense, us, and we are them. Whatever actions we undertake for good or ill, we undertake only in our imagination – and it is there we can find the impact of our great and terrible actions, not in the real world, whether in the past or in the future of what we might do. It is in what we do to ourselves that the ethics of fictional identification might be found, and it is with this point that any future study tracing these processes must begin. Rather than mimesis or the depiction of values in a text, it is the self-imposed power dynamics involved in identification, reader causality, and the inference of authority that produces ethical and unethical outcomes in reader activity.

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